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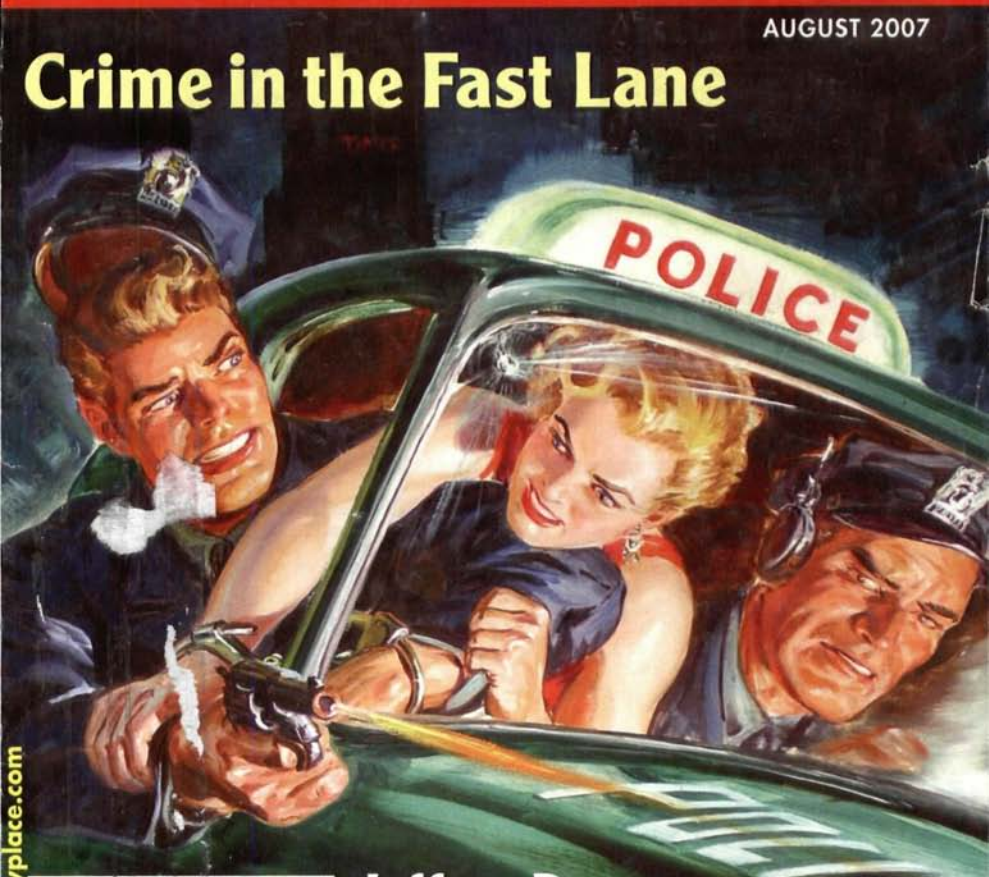

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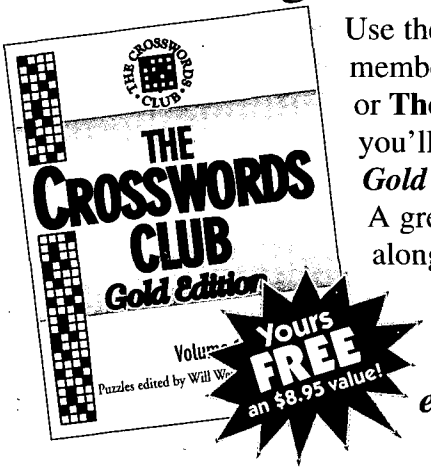

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AUGUST 2007

CONTENTS

Stranger on a train
Page 18

Missing singer
Page 108

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Note: indicia on
page 144

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FICTION

Making Amends
BY JEFFERY DEAVER 2

The Shakespeare Express
BY EDWARD MARSTON 18

The Good Daughter
BY MELODIE JOHNSON HOWE 32

The Estate
BY PETER TURNBULL 48

My Funny Valentine
BY FRANK WYDRA 55

Girl's Best Friend
BY JUDITH CUTLER 77

The Dragon's Breath
BY NORMAN KEIFETZ 103

Makin' Up and Breakin' Up
BY JEREMIAH HEALY 108

China Blues
BY EDWARD D. HOCH 121

REVIEWS

Blog Bytes BY BILL CRIDER 76

The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN 88

PASSPORT TO CRIME

The Live Weapon
BY RICHARD MACKER 134

DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

Evidence
BY VICTORIA WEISFELD 91

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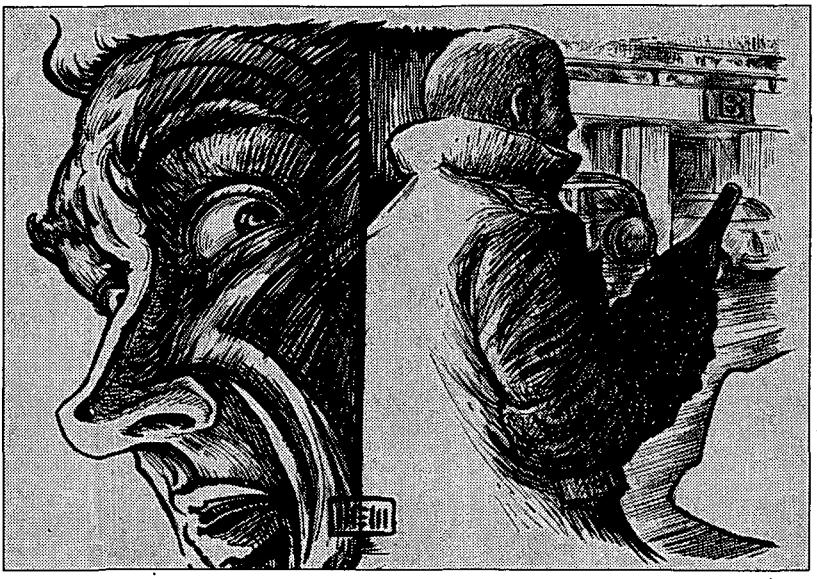

Art by Mark Evan Walker

MAKING AMENDS

by Jeffery Deaver

Jamie Feldon woke up one cool Monday morning in April and decided to change his life.

The night before, he'd fallen asleep on the couch, thinking about a sitcom he'd just watched. It was great, really kick-ass. Most TV comedies were just plain stupid: twenty-five-year-olds tossing out one-liners, then mugging for the camera while the Laugh sign goosed the audience to make noise.

No, this show was different. The hero was a guy who'd had an Oh-Jesus moment or something and was making amends for everything bad that he'd done in his life. Each episode, he'd track down somebody he'd screwed over or hurt and apologize and make it up to them.

Pretty damn sharp.

Jamie'd lain on the couch, mesmerized by the show, laughing and once or twice even crying, which was something he never did.

You can believe it, real tears.

He'd thought about that show for hours until, still dressed, he'd fallen asleep.

Now, at seven-thirty A.M., the forty-two-year-old rolled over and rubbed his face, feeling the creases left by the corduroy slipcover.

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He squinted hard and studied what sat beside him on the coffee table: half a bottle of Wild Turkey bourbon, an overflowing ashtray, and a bag of popcorn with a bunch of unpopped old maids inside; the microwave was on its way out.

Swinging his feet to the floor, Jamie pulled the remote control out from under him, the smell of sweat and unwashed clothes wafting around him. He wrinkled his nose, then wiped it on the sleeve of his pale-blue dress shirt. The TV set was still on but quiet; he'd hit the mute button in his sleep. On the screen, an early morning talk-show host was silently moving his lips. He seemed real sincere. A picture flashed on—two Asian kids holding bowls of rice. They were happy. Back to the host. He now looked happy too.

The Sleeping Doll, the latest novel from bestselling thriller writer Jeffery Deaver, went on sale in the U.S. in June. The book gives a starring role to CBI Special Agent Kathryn Dance, who had a secondary part in Mr. Deaver's last Lincoln Rhyme novel, *The Cold Moon*. Prior to becoming a full-time fiction writer, the Chicago-born author was a practicing lawyer, a songwriter, and a magazine journalist. ¶

Jamie shut the set off. It crackled as the screen went black.

He stretched and felt his belly pressing his waistband. He figured the Big Macs-for-lunch, pizza-for-dinner diet he'd been on lately was finally catching up. His head throbbed with the drumbeat of a marching band.

He happened to glance at the mail, dumped on the floor the other day. He hadn't looked at it then. He now saw that the letter on top was from the family court. What now? he wondered sourly. He'd had a problem—wasn't his fault—and had missed picking up his son last month. The ex'd made a big stink about it. Maybe she was trying to modify visitation. What a bitch. Or maybe it was something else. Was he late with the maintenance or the child-support check? He couldn't remember. He didn't know what the hell she had to complain about, though, even if he was a little late. Christ, she got fifty-six percent of his salary. (Though that wasn't exactly a gold mine; as a claims agent for a small insurance agency, Jamie made squat.)

He eased forward and cradled his aching head, crowned with an unruly fringe of thinning red hair, lost in his depression, the relentless troubles. The words that popped into his mind were "the bottom."

That's where I am. I've hit bottom. . . .

And just like the night before, watching that TV sitcom, tears welled in his eyes.

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Sitting here, in his shabby two-bedroom apartment, the graying walls decorated with stains and scuff marks, some of them dating back to when he moved in four years ago, Jamie couldn't get that show out of his thoughts: the guy making amends for all the bad things in his past.

Then he began considering the offenses in his own life: fellow workers, his brother, ex-bosses, girlfriends, students at his community college, his ex-wife, his mother, even kids in his grade school.

Pettiness, cheating, insults, and—just like the hero of the TV show—even a few crimes.

His initial reaction was to offer excuses.

It wasn't so bad, it was an accident, everybody acts that way, everybody cheats from time to time. . . .

But then he stopped cold.

Furious with himself. Excuses, excuses, excuses.

No more!

Instinctively he reached for the whisky.

Then, as if he was watching himself from a distance—viewing himself on a TV screen—he saw his arm slow.

Then it stopped.

No, my friend, that's not the way it's going to be this time.

He was going to change. Just like that guy on TV, he'd look back over his life, he'd make a list of all the bad things. And he'd set them right.

Making amends . . .

Jamie rose unsteadily, picked up the liquor, and poured it down the kitchen sink. He returned to the living room and eyed his cigarettes. Well, he knew he couldn't give *them* up, not completely. But he was going to limit himself to ten a day. . . . Wait, no, five. And he'd never smoke before noon. That was reasonable. That was *mature.*

He staggered into the bathroom and took a fiercely hot shower, then a freezing one. He toweled off and walked into his kitchenette, had half a bagel with no butter, and coffee without cream.

It was a very different Jamie Feldon who stepped from his apartment into the bright New England morning twenty minutes later, virtually sauntering to the parking lot. He dropped into the seat of his battered Toyota, started the engine, and headed for Route 128, which would take him to his office, twenty miles north of Boston. Normally the congestion drove him crazy. But today, he hardly noticed it. He was thinking about the possibility of a future real different from the disaster his life had been. He could actually foresee being content, being happy.

Making amends . . .

And yet, Jamie realized sitting at his desk later that day, it might be easy to work up the determination to stick to your moral convictions, but there were practical issues to consider, logistical problems.

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In the TV show, for instance, the hero had spent a half-hour or so coming up with a list of people he'd offended or hurt.

But that was fiction. In real life, coming up with a list of offenses would take a lot of work. So at quitting time, he went to his boss and asked for the rest of the week off.

The chunky, disheveled manager swung back and forth slowly in his old office chair. He clearly wasn't happy with the idea. But Jamie was determined to stick to his plan, so he added, "I'm talking without pay, Mr. Logan."

"Without . . . " The boss was working to get his head around this idea.

"Unpaid leave."

The words were sinking in, but Logan still seemed uncertain, maybe wondering if Jamie was scheming—hoping the boss would say, *Naw, it's okay, I'll pay you anyway.*

Jamie said sincerely, "I mean it, Mr. Logan, really. Something personal's come up and I really need the time."

"You sick?"

"No. But there're a few people need my help."

"Yeah, you doing good deeds?" Logan laughed.

"Something like that."

"Well, you find somebody to cover for you, yeah, then I guess it's all right."

"Thanks, Mr. Logan. I appreciate it. I really do."

As he left he glanced back and noticed his boss studying him with a perplexed smile—as if he was looking at a brand-new Jamie Feldon.

Returning home that night, Jamie called around until he found a temp worker who was familiar with the company. He arranged for the man to start the next morning as a replacement.

On Tuesday, Jamie woke early, showered, dressed, and ate a bowl of cereal with low-fat milk. Then he cleaned his kitchen table off and went to work. A pad of yellow paper in front of him, he began the list. It wasn't easy, compiling all the bad things in your life. Some were hard to deal with—he felt so much shame about them. Some, he wasn't sure if they'd actually occurred. Were they figments of his imagination, dreams, a result of the booze?

He also realized that he had to decide which offenses to include. Some were serious, some seemed laughably minor. He told himself at first not to worry about the small things.

But something stiffened within him when he thought that.

No, he thought angrily. Either you do this right or you don't do it at all. He'd include the smallest infractions, as well as the most serious.

He worked for two days straight and finally came up with a list of forty-three incidents. Then he spent another day identifying the people involved and finding out their most recent addresses. Some he knew, others required detective work. Using the phone book,

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directory assistance, and his computer, as well as actually pounding the pavement, he managed to get at least a lead to nearly everybody.

By Thursday night, Jamie was finished with the list and he celebrated with a tall glass of Arizona iced tea, mint-flavored, and a cigarette. Before he headed off to bed, though, he considered another question: Should he start with the older offenses, or the newest?

Jamie debated this for some time and decided that he'd start with the most recent. He was worried that he'd get bogged down finding people from decades ago, and he was eager to get his new life underway.

So, the most recent.

Who was first?

A glance at the list. The name on the top was *Charles Vaughn, Lincoln.*

The man awoke on Friday morning with the Memory.

This had happened nearly every day since the incident a month and a half ago.

The Memory was there when he awoke, and it was there when he fell asleep. And it popped up all by itself a couple of times during the day, too.

It was one of those things you try to forget, but the harder you try the more you relive it.

Then your gut twists, your palms grow clammy, and a chill pall of dread fills you. Anger too.

You hope that time will take care of it. And probably that'll happen eventually, but like when you're wracked with the flu, you just can't imagine you'll ever feel better.

Charles Vaughn had a good life. He was a senior sales manager for a large Internet software company. He'd gotten his MBA at New York University and had played with the big boys in the Wall Street finance world for a long time, then moved to Bean Town to join a startup. A year ago he jumped to his present company. He was tough, he played hardball (but never screwing around with the heavy-hitters, the IRS or the SEC), and he did well. Now, at forty-nine, he knew what the real world was about: doing a good job, being invaluable to your customers—and, just as important, if not more, to your boss—and paying attention to details. Looking over your shoulder, too—making millions and making enemies go hand in hand.

He'd moved up through the ranks of the company fast and had a shot at being president in the next few years.

The businessman had a beautiful home in Lincoln, a wife who was a successful realtor, and two kids headed for good colleges in the next couple of years. He had his health.

Everything about his life seemed perfect.

And it would have been, except for the goddamn Memory. It just wouldn't leave him alone.

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What happened was this: Vaughn and his wife and daughter made the mistake of spending St. Patrick's Day at that tourist trap of stores and restaurants in Boston, Faneuil Hall, along with, of course, about a billion other people. Just as they were about to head home, his daughter remembered she needed to get a birthday present for her friend.

"We're out of time on the meter," Vaughn pointed out.

"Dad, it's, like, what? A quarter?"

They'd been shopping for two hours, and only now she remembered the present? Vaughn sighed. "I'll be in the car."

"We'll just be a minute." His daughter and wife disappeared back inside. Vaughn pumped another quarter into the meter and climbed into the car. He started the engine and cranked up the heater to cut through the infamous Boston spring chill.

Of course, it wasn't "a minute" at all: In fact, twenty of them rolled by without the two ladies surfacing. Vaughn sat back and was thinking about a man at work, a rival salesman who was making a move on some accounts that were up for grabs and that Vaughn really wanted. The rival wasn't as good a salesman, but he knew the tech side of the product better than any other employee, except the programmers themselves. Vaughn'd have to come up with some plan to stop him. He was considering what he could do when he heard a honk. He glanced into the street and saw a driver in a car pausing next to him. The man had a pudgy face and was about Vaughn's age, maybe a little younger.

He said something.

Vaughn shook his head and opened his passenger window. "What's that?"

"You leaving?" Gesturing at the parking space.

"Not just yet," Vaughn replied with a smile. "Waiting for the wife."

Which any man would understand was humorous shorthand for: It could be five minutes, could be an hour.

But the guy in the battered car didn't smile. "Just pull out and wait for her up there. Double-park."

Vaughn blinked at the man's bluntness. "Rather not. She and my daughter are expecting me here."

"I'm not saying drive to the Cape. Just pull up a car or two. You're leaving anyway."

"I'm not sure how long they'll be."

"It can't be that long. Your engine's running, isn't it?"

Vaughn's face grew red; he was angry and uneasy. "Think I'd rather wait here." He shut the engine off.

"Oh, that was cute," the man snapped. He seemed drunk.

St. Patrick's Day . . . piss-poor excuse for a holiday.

Vaughn turned away and rolled up the window. He glanced at the shops, hoping he'd see his wife and daughter.

The other driver shouted something else, which Vaughn couldn't

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hear. He stared at the control panel of his Acura, thinking that if he ignored the guy he'd go away.

Come on, he thought to his family, growing angry at them for putting him in this position.

It was then that he glanced toward his right, into the street, and saw that the door on the battered car was open. Where—

A rush of motion from the sidewalk. Vaughn's car door was jerked open before he could reach the door-lock button.

The driver was leaning down, directly in Vaughn's face. With a steam of drunken, smoky breath between them, the man said, "Listen up, asshole. I don't need anybody to dis me like that. The hell you think you are?"

Vaughn fixed his eyes on the scruffy man. Not in great shape, but big. Both scared and angry, Vaughn said, "I'm not leaving until my family's here. Live with it."

"Live with it? I'll give *you* something to live with." He flicked away a cigarette and ran his key along the side of the Acura, scraping off a line of paint.

"That's it!" Vaughn pulled his cell phone from his pocket, hit 9-1-1.

A police dispatcher came on immediately. "This is nine-one-one. What's the nature of your emergency?"

"I'm being attacked. Please send somebody—"

"You prick," the assailant muttered and reached for him, but Vaughn leaned back into the car.

"Your name, sir?" the dispatcher asked. "What's your address?"

"Charles Vaughn . . . I live in Lincoln but I'm in my car at Faneuil Hall, near Williams-Sonoma. He's drunk, he's attacking me. I—"

The big man lunged forward, snatched the phone away, and flung it to the sidewalk, where it shattered. Bystanders jumped back, though most stayed close—to watch whatever was going to happen next. A couple of drunk teenagers laughed and started chanting, "Fight, fight, fight."

The man gripped Vaughn's jacket and tried to pull him out of the car.

"Get off me!" Vaughn gripped the wheel and the men played tug of war until a siren sounded nearby, getting closer.

Thank God . . .

The assailant, his face red with rage, let go and stood frozen for a moment, as if he was wondering what else he could do to Vaughn. He settled for repeating, "You prick," and ran back to his car. He spun the wheels in reverse, disappearing around the corner. Vaughn strained his neck looking back but he couldn't see the license plate.

Hands shaking, breath ticking with the fright, Vaughn felt weak with fear and dread.

The police arrived and took a statement, made a note of the incident and the damage to the car. Vaughn was giving them what

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information he could remember when another thought occurred to him. His voice faded.

"What, sir?" an officer asked, noticing the businessman's troubled face.

"He heard me give nine-one-one my name. And where I lived. The town, I mean. Do you think he'll try to find me to get even?"

The police didn't seem concerned. "Road rage, or parking rage, whatever, it never lasts very long. I don't think you're in any danger."

"Besides," one officer added, nodding at the damage to the paint, "looks like he already *did* get even."

The police talked to passersby—with less enthusiasm than Vaughn would have liked—but nobody had gotten the man's tag number—or was willing to admit it if they had. Then another call came in on their radio—another fight in progress.

"St. Paddy's Day," one of the officers spat out, shaking his head. They hurried off.

"You okay?" one of the bystanders asked.

"Yeah, thanks," Vaughn said, not feeling the least bit okay. He ran his hand across the long scratch in the paint. He kept replaying the incident. Had it been his fault? Should he have given the guy the space? Of course not. But how had he sounded? Was he abrupt, insulting? He hadn't thought so, certainly hadn't meant to be.

Finally his wife and daughter returned from the hall, toting several small bags. They noticed the damage to the car and the pieces of Vaughn's cell phone sitting in the backseat.

"What happened, honey?"

He explained to them.

"Oh, Dad, no! Are you all right?"

"Fine. Just get in."

He locked the doors and drove away fast. On the turnpike Vaughn checked the rearview mirror every few seconds. But he saw no sign of the attacker's car. His wife and daughter chatted away as if nothing had happened. Vaughn was quiet, upset about the incident. And the anger—at them and at himself—wasn't going away.

When they were a few miles from home Judy asked, "Something wrong, honey? You're not still bothered by that crazy man, are you?"

"No," he said. "I'm just a little tired."

"Don't worry," she said. "It's just paint. They can fix it up like new."

Sometimes women just didn't get it at all.

"Oh, Dad," his daughter said urgently, "can we stop at Beth's? I want to give her the necklace."

"No."

"But it's right up there."

"I said no."

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"But—"

"No," he snapped. "You'll see her at school tomorrow."

The girl wasn't happy—the friend's house was, after all, on the way home—but Vaughn wouldn't change his mind.

When they arrived at home he pulled his wife aside and told her his big concern—that the man had heard Vaughn mention his name and the town they lived in.

"Oh." Now Judy seemed miffed. His impression was that she was upset he'd gotten into the fight in the first place and hadn't just given the guy the parking space, then double-parked to wait for them. As if it was male ego that'd caused the problem.

He came a millisecond away from reminding her that their last-minute shopping spree was the ultimate cause of the whole thing, but self-preservation kicked in and he managed to restrain himself. He said, "The police don't think it's anything to worry about. But just keep an eye out." He described the man.

"Keep an eye out," she muttered, and walked off silently to make dinner.

Vaughn didn't eat much that night (his excuse was that his stomach was upset from the fast food they'd had for lunch, which his wife had ordered—a fact he managed to work into his explanation, with some petty satisfaction).

After his family went to bed that night, Vaughn climbed the stairs to the study above the garage and stayed awake for a long time, keeping a vigil, staring out at the street, looking for any sign of the assailant.

At three A.M. or so he fell asleep with the Memory prominently sitting in his thoughts.

And the next morning he awoke with it.

Vaughn forced himself to relax and, even though he was groggy from lack of sleep, he made breakfast for the family, spent a cheerful half-hour with them, and then headed off to work.

But the good mood didn't last. The Memory kept coming back. He replayed the incident a hundred times that day. He regretted not fighting back, not grabbing the man and wrestling him to the ground, pinning him there until the cops arrived. He felt he was a coward, a failure.

He was so distracted he missed the lunch he'd set up to woo the big client that his rival was after.

Over the next six weeks things grew worse. Several times on the way to work he spotted cars that might have been the assailant's, and skidded off the highway, desperate to escape. Two weeks ago he'd nearly slammed into a woman's SUV in a grocery store parking lot while staring at a car behind him. And another time, leaving a local bar, he'd seen a man in sunglasses across the street; Vaughn believed he looked like the assailant. Panicked, the businessman leapt back inside the bar, knocking into several people and spilling

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drinks. He nearly tripped down the back stairs of the bar as he fled.

All of these incidents turned out to be false alarms—the men he'd seen were not the attacker—but he couldn't shake the fear that consumed him.

Finally, he couldn't take it anymore. One morning Vaughn canceled a meeting at work and drove to a building outside of town, a place he'd found in the Yellow Pages, a gun shop and shooting range. There he bought a 9mm semiautomatic Glock pistol and enrolled in the course that would give him a Class A firearm permit, allowing him to carry a concealed weapon.

Today, at lunch, he was going to complete the course and get the license. From now on he could carry the gun wherever he wanted to.

Jamie Feldon woke up at nine on Friday, well rested and ready to get started on his new life.

Unlike the typical evening from his past, last night he'd slept in his bed, under clean sheets, wearing clean pajamas, and, even though he'd had a beer with dinner, he'd gone to sleep sober. He'd also stuck to his rule of only two cigarettes for the entire evening. He brushed his teeth for a full minute.

Now, eating a modest breakfast, he looked over the notes he'd taken about Charles Vaughn. The businessman lived in Lincoln. But Jamie wanted to see him without his family around, so he'd Googled the name and found him mentioned on some computer industry websites. He learned where the man worked, an Internet company about ten miles away.

Jamie decided to take something along with him, and after some thinking he had a brainstorm: Champagne. Vaughn, he recalled, was a man who dressed well and would probably have good taste.

After washing his breakfast dishes, Jamie jumped in his car and headed off to the nearest wine store, figuring he'd spend some serious money on the bottle. You can't scrimp when you're working on a new life.

"Good shooting," the man said.

He was a well-toned fifty-year-old with cropped gray hair. Tendons and muscles were prominent in his arms and neck. His name was Larry Bolling, and he was the senior instructor at Patriot Guns and Shooting Range, where Charles Vaughn had been taking his lessons.

Vaughn pulled his ear protectors off. "What?"

"Good shooting, I said."

"Thanks." Vaughn put the black semiautomatic pistol down on the bench in front of him as the instructor reeled the target back in. The eight shots were grouped tight in the silhouette's chest.

The shooting wasn't competition-level but he was satisfied.

The idea that Charles Vaughn would be spending any time at all

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thinking about grain weight of bullets and the advantages of a SIG-Sauer safety (a thumb lever) versus a Glock (a second trigger) was hilarious. Here was a man who made his living with credit reports and product-spec sheets, and yet he was spending his lunch hour shooting at images of Bin Laden and John Q. Thug.

But even more ironic was that Charles Vaughn had turned into a pretty damn good shot.

At first he'd held the gun stiffly, in a way that seemed to mimic what he'd seen actors do in the movies.

"Now, sir," Larry Bolling had explained at the first lesson, "you might not want to do that."

"What's that?"

"Hold your weapon that way."

"Okay. Sure. Why not?"

"Because when you pull the trigger, the slide—See that part there—is gonna fly back at, oh, about a thousand miles an hour, and it'll take a portion of your thumb with it. What you do is just rest one hand on the other. Sorta like this."

"This?"

"That's right. Now let's go put some holes in a target."

Well, at first he hadn't put a lot of holes in anything but the bullet trap at the back of the range. But today he'd been rewarded for his skill.

Good shooting . . .

After the lunch-hour lesson today, Vaughn dismantled the gun, then cleaned, reassembled, and reloaded it.

He found Bolling in the front office, hunched over some papers. He motioned Vaughn to take a chair.

"So, I get my ticket?" the businessman asked.

"Not quite yet, sir."

Vaughn frowned. He'd passed all the tests with perfect scores. He'd also passed the background checks. He'd attended all of the video and live-instruction sessions, had done all his homework.

"I thought that was it."

"Nope," Bolling explained. "There's one more thing that I include in my classes."

"Okay, what's that?"

"You need to answer a question."

"Go ahead."

"Why do you want a carry permit? You never told me."

"I'm a wealthy businessman. I'm concerned about my family. There's a lot of crime in Boston."

"That's all true—at least I can attest to the last one of those, and the other two are no doubt right, as well. But why don't you tell me the real reason?"

Vaughn could only laugh. He shook his head and explained about the attack on St. Patrick's Day.

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"Okay, sir, I understand that was upsetting. But that's not a good reason to carry a weapon."

"But he was dangerous."

"Let me ask: That was six weeks ago, give or take; you seen hide or hair of that man since then?"

"I don't think so," Vaughn said defensively.

A nod toward the pistol on the businessman's hip. "You've done good in the course. You know safety and you've got every legal right to carry that. My advice to you is to take it home, put it in a lockbox, and leave it there until the next time you come here to have some fun. Then take it home again and put it back in the box. You get my drift?"

"But—"

"Listen to me."

Vaughn looked up into the man's steely eyes. He nodded.

"Most people, in their entire lives, there's a one in a million chance that there'd be a good reason to draw their weapon on the street, and even less of a chance they ought to use it. The absolute best possible thing you can do in a confrontation is turn and run like a rabbit, calling for help at the top of your lungs. I'll tell you from my heart that that's exactly what I'd do."

"Run."

"As fast as your feet can carry you. And if you're with your grandmother, or your child, you sling 'em over your shoulder and carry 'em with you. . . . A gun's for that one time in your life when you're trapped, there's no help around, and your assailant intends to kill you. That situation in Boston, naturally it upset you, and no doubt that man was a solid-gold son of a bitch. And you're thinking you were a coward. But I'm telling you, it's braver to live with a feeling like that than to go looking for trouble."

"Well, duly noted," Vaughn said. "I appreciate your comments."

"There, I've said my piece." Bolling produced a temporary permit. "Good luck to you, sir."

Leaving the gun shop and range, returning to his car, Charles Vaughn was thinking about Bolling's words. But they didn't stay with him long. He was aware of a curious feeling. It was as if something fundamental in his life had changed. He thought back to the incident in Boston and found, to his surprise, his gut didn't twist, his heart didn't pound quite so fast. The anger—at the attacker, and at himself for his cowardice—was almost gone.

Charles Vaughn walked to his car and headed back to work, buoyed by a confidence that he hadn't felt for months. Maybe even years.

At five P.M. that evening Jamie Feldon sat in the front seat of his Toyota, listening to the radio and watching people leave the office of NES Computer Products.

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He didn't know if Charles Vaughn was a workaholic—a lot of times those Internet guys really put in the hours—but Jamie would stay as long as he needed to in order to see the guy. Beside him was a grilled chicken sandwich from McDonald's, an iced tea, and a bottle of Champagne whose name he couldn't pronounce, which meant that it had to be good.

He ate his dinner, listened to the radio, and thought about the other people on his list.

Then, at seven P.M., Jamie saw Charles Vaughn leave by the front door, look around, and then head toward the parking garage.

Jamie took a deep breath.

Making amends.

A new life.

He grabbed the Champagne, stepped out of the car, and started up the sidewalk to the garage.

Approaching his car, Charles Vaughn examined the paint job. The body shop had completely erased the damage from when the psycho had keyed his car outside Faneuil Hall.

Just like the gun on his hip had erased the psychic scarring.

He no longer felt defenseless, no longer felt scared. In fact, despite the gun instructor's advice (which Vaughn thought was a bit hypocritical, considering his job), he was hoping the man *would* make his move.

I'm ready for you.

It was then that he heard a snap—or some sound—not far away. He froze and looked around. The garage was deserted here; after his lesson at the gun shop he'd returned to find parking only on the fifth floor. His was the only car here now. He shifted his briefcase to his left hand. His pistol was only a few inches away from his right.

But, he told himself, how would the punk know where he worked? He might've been staking out Lincoln, but here? Impossible.

Though if the guy was really determined, it wouldn't be impossible to find out his company. Vaughn squinted, scanning the floor behind him. Was that the shadow of someone on the far stairwell? He couldn't tell.

His heart beating quickly, he remembered the man's face, remembered the anger in his eyes, the smell of liquor, the uncontrolled hands as they gripped Vaughn's lapels.

A chill tickled his spine. But it wasn't fear; it was exhilaration.

Keeping his right hand free, Vaughn set his briefcase down and fished for his car keys, while he scanned the garage in the direction he believed the sound had come from.

The sound again.

He hit the unlock button on the key. But still didn't get inside. He tapped the gun with his right palm.

Vaughn tensed as the sound of tires squealing filled his ears. He

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laughed to himself, watching the pickup truck squeal down the exit ramp from the top floor, where maintenance workers and contractors were supposed to park. That was the noise he'd heard, the men loading up the truck.

It was then that a man's voice behind him said, "Excuse me, Mr. Vaughn? You probably don't remember me . . ."

Vaughn gasped, dropping the car keys. He stared at the figure approaching him, carrying something large in his right hand. It looked like a club, a bowling pin.

Jesus, it's him, it's the attacker!

Instinctively, Vaughn dropped into a combat shooting pose, drew his gun, and aimed directly at the man's chest. He started to pull the trigger.

Jamie Feldon gasped, holding up a hand as if it could ward off the bullet that was about to end his life. "No! Please!"

Neither Jamie nor Vaughn moved.

Time was frozen.

Jamie heard nothing, he felt nothing.

It was so quiet. . . . Had the gun actually gone off? Maybe it had and he was dead.

But then he felt wind on his cheek and heard a truck shifting gears nearby. A horn honked in the distance. His heart, too . . . he could actually hear it.

"Please," he whispered. "Please don't. . . ."

Vaughn was squinting at Jamie. "Could you . . . I'm sorry, could you step into the light there?"

Jamie did.

Vaughn studied his face, then the Champagne. He slumped. "My God, my God, my God . . ." The gun lowered and the businessman leaned against his car. "I thought . . . I'm sorry, I thought you were somebody else."

Feeling his hands quiver madly, Jamie gave a breathless laugh. "Who?"

Vaughn said, "This guy I had a run-in with in Boston. On St. Patrick's Day . . . I'm so sorry. I couldn't see you clearly." His shoulders slumped. "Or maybe I was just so paranoid." He glanced down at the gun with wide eyes and quickly put it in the holster on his hip. "Are you . . . are you all right?"

Jamie laughed. "Well, I've gotta say I'm a lot better now that you put that thing away. Thought I'd pee my pants for a minute there."

"Who are you?"

"My name's Jamie Feldon."

Vaughn shook his head. "Do I know you?"

"Not really, but we've met."

"What can I do for you?"

Jamie said brightly, "I've come to see you about making

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amends." He nodded at the Champagne.

"Amends?" Vaughn asked, frowning. "What did you do to me?"

"Oh," Jamie said, "it's not what I did to *you*. It's what you did to *me*."

"To you? What—?" Vaughn asked. But before he could continue, Jamie lunged forward and swung the bottle into the side of the businessman's head.

The businessman went down like a rock.

Five minutes later Charles Vaughn came to.

Jamie was standing over him, aiming the man's pistol at his chest, the grip of the gun wrapped in a napkin he'd found in a nearby trash bin.

"What," Vaughn gasped, "what's this all about?" He squinted.

"Amends," he said. "Like I said."

"But I don't even know you. . . . What'd I do?"

"You really don't remember, do you?"

"No. I swear."

"Well, take a good look."

"I'm sorry. Really. Please put down the gun. We can talk about it."

"Think back," Jamie said in a smooth voice. "Think back to late March. You were in the Lincoln Brew Pub."

"I go there all the time."

"I know. But this particular day you should remember. You started to walk out the door, but all of a sudden you jumped back, like you saw a goddamn ghost. You spilled my Bloody Mary all over me. And then you just run out the back door." Jamie gave a cold laugh. "Do you say you're sorry? Do you offer to pay for the dry cleaning? No."

"Wait . . ." Vaughn was shaking his head. "I remember that. But . . . Wait, how did you find me?"

"Just asked the bartender at the Lincoln Pub what your name was. Then I Googled you and found where you lived and worked. Had to see you alone, of course. Didn't want your family around."

"You have to understand—at the bar back then in March? That guy I was telling you about, the attacker? I thought he was outside. I was afraid."

Jamie shrugged. "I was supposed to pick up my kid for visitation but I had that drink all over me. Couldn't pick him up looking like that, could I? I had to go home and change. I was late and his mother'd taken him someplace with her by the time I got there. Made a big deal about it with the court, too."

"I'm sorry, but—"

"Sorry, but," Jamie mocked. "See, I've been putting up with crap like that all my life. People've insulted me, cheated me, made fun of me, *bumped into* me ever since I was a kid. And I've never had the guts to fight back. I just swallowed it all. . . . I get walked over

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and I never have the balls to do anything. But a week ago I decided I'm not going to put up with it anymore. People're going to make amends to me for what they've done. And you're the first on my list."

"Make amends?" Vaughn gasped. "But I just spilled something on you. What do you want? You want money?"

"No, I want you to die," Jamie said matter-of-factly and shoved the gun against Vaughn's head, then pulled the trigger.

After he cleaned the blood off his own face and hands Jamie wrapped the dead man's fingers around the gun and quickly left the garage. He looked around. Nobody seemed to have heard the shot. He walked slowly down the stairs and out to the lot where he was parked, carrying the Champagne. Jamie'd taken the bottle to use as a weapon; it was something that nobody would be suspicious of. He'd planned to either beat Vaughn to death with it, or, if it broke, use the jagged neck to slash the man's carotid artery.

But Vaughn had actually been carrying a gun! If the businessman was really so jittery about whatever'd happened on St. Patrick's Day, the cops might get the idea he'd gone over the edge and killed himself. Or maybe they'd think that guy who'd attacked him had finally tracked him down.

Jamie climbed in his car and drove slowly out of the parking lot. He kept hearing Vaughn's words in his mind.

At the bar back then in March? That guy I was telling you about, the attacker? I thought he was outside. I was afraid.

Excuses, Jamie reflected in disgust. There were always excuses. And he wasn't going to accept them anymore.

Jamie was going to be true to his resolution. The TV show he'd seen had changed him forever. People had to make amends for their transgressions, and he was going to be the angel of justice to make sure they did.

Who next? He glanced down at the list and noticed his wife's name, but she was at the bottom. He'd have to handle that one carefully since he'd be a prime suspect in her death.

But there were plenty of scores to settle before her.

He saw the name below Vaughn's.

Carole, in Scituate. She was a thirty-five-year-old bank manager he'd taken out on a date in February. They'd gone to the Red Lobster, All You Can Eat . . . and she sure had.

But afterwards, a double insult: She'd refused to sleep with him and then she'd never called, like she'd promised.

It was seven-thirty. Did he have time to take care of Carole tonight?

Sure he did, Jamie decided. Tomorrow was Saturday; he could sleep in. Besides, there were a lot of names on his list; it'd feel good to mark another one off.

He lit a cigarette, only his fourth of the day, and headed for the turnpike. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

THE SHAKESPEARE EXPRESS

by Edward Marston

1938

"Have you traveled on the *Shakespeare Express* before?" she asked.

"No," he answered. "This is our first visit to England. Mary Anne and I are still trying to find our feet."

"It's a wonderful train. In the old days, you could only get to Stratford by changing at Leamington Spa—a dreadful nuisance. Ten years ago, they introduced the *Shakespeare Express* so that we could go direct from Paddington to Stratford-upon-Avon."

"That will suit us fine."

Cyrus and Mary Anne Hillier had been standing on the railway platform that morning when they fell into conversation with the attractive young woman in a tailored suit that somehow managed to look both smart and casual. Dipping down towards one eye, her hat concealed much of her close-cropped fair hair. Since their arrival in the country, they had found English people rather reserved, but here was the exception to the general rule. Tall, shapely, and impeccably well bred, she described herself as an

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unrepentant worshiper at the altar of the Bard.

"Then you and Cyrus are two of a kind," said Mary Anne, looking fondly at her husband. "He's written books on Shakespeare."

"Really?" said the other woman. "How marvellous!"

"Cyrus is a professor of Drama at Penn State University. In fact, he's the chairman of the department."

"That means nothing over here, honey," he said modestly.

"Well, it should do."

"I'm just an anonymous member of the audience today."

"You're an expert," his wife insisted.

Edward Marston's forty-some crime novels mostly belong to four separate series, set in four distinct periods of history: the 11th century, the Elizabethan era, London after the Great Fire of 1666, and the Victorian period. The former university history lecturer is adept at bringing the past alive, as readers of his latest Christopher Redmayne Victorian novel, *The Iron Horse* (Allison & Busby), will see. ✝

"I agree," said the younger woman. "If you've written books on a subject, you must be an authority." She offered her hand. "It's an honour to meet you, Professor." They shook hands. "My name is Rosalind Walker, by the way. I'm not an authority on anything."

"Except the *Shakespeare Express*," noted Cyrus.

They shared a laugh. The three of them were soon on first-name terms. Rosalind learned that they had saved up for years in order to make the pilgrimage to Stratford-upon-Avon. She warmed to them. They were a delightful middle-aged couple who seemed to complement each other perfectly. Cyrus was a short, stout man with a bushy black beard flecked with silver. He was shrewd, watchful, and bristling with quiet intelligence. Mary Anne, by contrast, a trim, angular woman, was spirited and voluble. It was left to her to boast about her husband's academic career, to talk about their two children, and to recount the pleasures of their Atlantic crossing.

"How long are you staying in Stratford?" asked Rosalind.

"Three nights," replied Mary Anne. "At the Shakespeare Hotel."

"Very appropriate."

"That's what we thought."

"Tony and I usually stay at the Billesley Manor."

"Tony?"

"My brother. He's as mad about Shakespeare as I am." Rosalind glanced at her watch. "He should be here by now. Tony had better get a move on. The train leaves at nine twenty-five on the dot."

"What time does it reach Stratford?" asked Cyrus.

"At eleven thirty-three precisely."

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"You certainly know your schedule."

"On the Great Western Railway, punctuality is a watchword."

"Do we stop on the way?"

"Yes—at High Wycombe, Leamington Spa, and Warwick. There'll be something of an exodus at Leamington Spa."

"Will there?" asked Mary Anne in surprise. "Why catch a through train to Stratford then get off before we reach it?"

"The passengers will reach it in time," explained Rosalind. "Their trip includes a coach trip, you see. They visit Guy's Cliffe and Kenilworth before having lunch at Warwick Castle. The coach then brings them on to Stratford so that they can see all the sights before catching the train back to London."

"I bet you can tell us the exact time that it leaves," said Cyrus.

"Five-thirty."

He grinned. "Are you employed by the railway company?"

"No—I'm a regular passenger, that's all."

"So I gather."

"Matinée performances start early so that people will have a chance to get back to the station in time to catch the train home. The Memorial Theatre prefers to give a full text."

"I'm all in favor of that, Rosalind. I want my money's worth."

"It does mean that performances can be very long. The last *Hamlet* went on for well over four hours."

"Cyrus could sit and watch all day," said Mary Anne, beaming with approval. "He relishes every single word."

"So do I, as a rule," said Rosalind, "but I doubt if I'll do that this afternoon. *Troilus and Cressida* is not my favorite play—too dark and brutal for my taste. But it's so rarely performed that I felt I had to catch it."

"I love the play," admitted Cyrus. "I did a production of it with my students last year. In my view, *Troilus and Cressida* is a neglected masterpiece. And, as it happens," he went on, "its themes have taken on an unfortunate topicality."

"In what way?"

"Look at the newspapers, Rosalind. The situation is increasingly grim. War clouds seem to be gathering all over Europe."

"Too true!" she sighed, pulling a face.

"The play is essentially about war and its implications. It's a pity you can't invite Adolf Hitler over to see it. He'd learn how futile war really is. One of the papers reckoned that if things go on as they are doing, Britain might be dragged into the conflict."

"Oh, I hope not. Tony would rush to enlist."

"A good patriot, obviously."

"My brother just likes adventure, that's all."

As they were talking, the platform had been slowly filling up and the noise level had risen markedly. There was a tangible air of anticipation. When the train came into the station, everyone

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surged towards the cream-and-brown carriages. Rosalind stood on tiptoe to look around her.

"Where on earth can he be?" she said anxiously.

"You'll have to go without him," suggested Mary Anne.

"Impossible—Tony has our tickets!"

"Oh dear!"

"Ah, there he is," declared Rosalind, looking back towards the barrier. "Do excuse me, I'll have to go." She moved away and tossed a farewell comment over her shoulder. "I'll see you at the theatre."

"What a charming young woman!" said Mary Anne.

"Yes," agreed Cyrus, helping her into the carriage.

Lifting up his suitcase, he paused long enough to watch Rosalind Walker greet a tall young man near the rear of the train. After exchanging a few words, the two of them got into a carriage. Mary Anne put her head out of the open door.

"Come on, Cyrus," she cajoled. "What are you waiting for?"

The locomotive was an elegant green monster of gleaming metal. It left on time in an explosion of steam and sustained clamor. When it hit its cruising speed, the train took on a steady rhythmical beat. Mary Anne was soon asleep. Travel of any kind invariably made her eyelids droop and her husband was grateful. It meant that he was spared any conversation and could concentrate on going through the text of *Troilus and Cressida* once more, savoring its multiple pleasures without having to persuade his wife that they actually existed. Mary Anne had many virtues and he loved her for them. She was not, however, an academic. Plays only existed at a surface level for her. She missed their deeper subtleties.

After stopping at High Wycombe, the train steamed on through the Oxfordshire countryside, rattling amiably and leaving a thick, gray cloud of smoke in its wake. When it eventually slowed again, Cyrus looked up, expecting to see the name of Leamington Spa on the station. Instead, he discovered that they were making a brief stoppage at Banbury. Back in motion once more, the *Shakespeare Express* gathered speed, its insistent chuffing like an endless stream of iambic pentameters.

It was not until they reached their destination that Cyrus nudged his wife awake. Mary Anne blinked her eyes and sat up abruptly. She peered through the window.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Stratford-upon-Avon."

"Already?"

"You've been asleep for two hours."

"Never!"

"As long as you don't do it during the matinée."

"I won't, Cyrus, I promise. I'd never let you down."

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"William Shakespeare is the person you'd be letting down."

Mary Anne was alarmed. "I'd never dare to do that—it would be a form of sacrilege."

The jewelry shop was a double-fronted establishment in the High Street. It had a wide selection of rings, brooches, necklaces, watches, and clocks on display. Inside the shop, it also had a range of silver cups that could be engraved on the premises. Albert Ives was a slight individual of middle years who prided himself on his ability to sum up a customer instantly. When the young man came into the shop, Ives needed only a glance to tell him that his customer had serious intentions. The man was there to buy rather than browse.

"Good morning," said the newcomer affably. "I'm looking for an engagement ring."

"What did you have in mind, sir?" asked Ives.

"Well, you have a tray in the middle of the window that rather caught my eye. One, in particular, looked promising. Solid gold, twenty-two karat, with a cluster of five diamonds."

"Would you like to take a closer look?"

"Yes, please."

"One moment."

Albert Ives unlocked the glass doors and reached into one of the front windows. The customer, meanwhile, glanced idly around the shop. When the tray was placed in front of him, he took out a monocle and slipped it into his eye, examining the array of rings with care. Ives took the opportunity to study the man. Tall, well dressed, and well groomed, he wore an expensive suit and a trilby that sat at a rakish angle on his head. A neat brown moustache acted as a focal point in a face that was pleasant rather than handsome. Ives noticed the costly gold cufflinks.

The customer was intrigued. "This is the one that I liked," he said, indicating the diamond ring, "yet this solitaire is almost twice as much. Why is that?"

"The stone is of a far higher quality, sir."

"But it's smaller than the cluster."

"Size is not everything," explained Ives. "If the solitaire were identical to the one that first caught your eye, then the price would be considerably higher."

"Really?"

Customers did not often show such a genuine interest in the trade, so Ives made the most of his captive audience. He talked at length about the virtues of the respective diamonds and drew the attention of the young man to the way that they were cut.

"Fascinating!" said the other.

"All that glitters is not gold, sir," said Ives complacently.

"I'll remember that, old chap. Well, it looks as if you've saved me

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from buying the wrong one." He indicated the solitaire. "Is this the best one you have in the shop or do you have any others?"

"We do keep a small selection in the safe."

"That's all right," said the customer airily as the other man raised a questioning eyebrow. "Money is no object. There's beggary in the love that can be reckoned." He laughed. "Heavens above, one only gets engaged once in a lifetime! Why spoil the ship for a ha'p'orth of tar?"

Ives ventured a smile. "I think you'll find it will be rather more than a ha'p'orth, sir. But, as you say, it's a unique occasion."

"Let me see what you have."

"I will, sir."

Albert Ives moved to the back of the shop and drew back a small curtain that hung at waist height. A large safe came into view. After using a key to begin the opening process, he then twiddled the tumblers until he found the correct combination. The heavy door swung silently open. Ives was about to reach into the safe when he realized that his customer was now standing directly behind him. Before he could turn, he was knocked unconscious with a vicious swing of a cosh. The safe was ransacked within seconds.

After checking into their hotel, the Hilliers had a light lunch before sauntering along to the theatre in the bright sunshine. The river swarmed with activity. Young men in baggy trousers, white shirts, and boaters were showing off their punting skills to decorous sweethearts who lounged on leather cushions under their parasols. An occasional rowing boat went by. Gaudily painted barges were moored along the towpath and swans glided effortlessly past, viewing the invasion of their territory with utter disdain. Crowds milled on both banks. Invisible to the eye, Shakespeare was nevertheless a discernible presence.

The Memorial Theatre commanded a fine view of the river. Opened six years earlier, it was a big, solid, unimposing structure. The Americans were very disappointed. Having walked along streets that were filled with half-timbered Tudor houses and dripping with character, they found the stark modernity of the theatre rather incongruous. Mary Anne turned to her husband.

"Why didn't they build it like an Elizabethan theatre?"

"I guess they had their reasons, honey," said Cyrus.

"It's such a letdown. The architect missed a golden opportunity. He should have designed it like the Globe playhouse."

"The architect was a woman—Elizabeth Scott."

"Then she should have known better," said Mary Anne.

"Let's not condemn it on its exterior," he suggested. "That would be unfair. The only way to judge a theatre properly is to watch a play being performed there. Come on."

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They joined the throng that was converging on the building. The Memorial Theatre could accommodate thirteen hundred people and it seemed as if every one of them was in the lobby. It was so congested that Cyrus and his wife had difficulty getting in. Over the heads of the crowd, he saw a counter where programs were being sold.

"Stay here, honey," he advised. "I won't be long."

"I'm not going anywhere," she said. "I can't move."

Cyrus forced a way through the press with polite firmness and joined the queue at the counter. A familiar face materialized beside him. Rosalind Walker gave him a warm smile.

"How nice to see you again!" she said.

"Hello, Rosalind. Is it always as crowded as this?"

"One gets used to it."

"The lobby should have been bigger."

"That's only one of its defects. The seats could be more comfortable, the upper balcony is too far from the stage, and—forgive my being indelicate—the ladies' cloakroom is woefully inadequate for this number of people."

"It's the stage that worries me. Proscenium arch, I'm told. Poor old Will wouldn't even know what that was. Why not try to recreate the performance conditions of his time?"

"A good question." After chatting for a couple of minutes, they got to the counter and bought their programs. Rosalind looked around. "Where's your wife?"

"Over by the door," said Cyrus. "If I can get back to her."

"Tony is out on the terrace, enjoying a cigarette."

"Wise man. Best place to be."

"I'm sure that he'd like to meet you. In the interval, perhaps."

"Yes. That would be nice."

"Where are you sitting?"

"Front stalls."

"We're at the back," she said easily. "And don't worry about the hordes. A lot of these people have actually got tickets to the balcony so they won't be down here in the interval. People in the stalls usually make a beeline for the bar." She moved away. "Enjoy the play."

"Oh, I will," he promised her. "Every moment of it."

Mildred Conroy was a full-bodied woman in her early sixties with a romantic streak. She always took a particular pleasure in selling engagement and wedding rings. When the couple entered her jewelry shop that afternoon, she sensed the distinct possibility of a sale. The young man was clearly a person of means and the two of them were evidently in love. The woman was darting affectionate glances at him and he kept his arm around her waist.

"Can I help you?" asked Mildred with professional sweetness.

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"We'd like to look at some engagement rings," said the man.

"Of course, sir. Does the young lady have any preference?"

"Well, I rather hope it's for me, actually."

"Oh, David!" scolded his companion as he burst out laughing at his own joke. "That's not what we were being asked and you know it." She turned an apologetic smile on Mildred. "Do excuse him. Perhaps we could look at some of those in the window?"

"Of course."

Mildred unlocked the glass doors and lifted out a display unit that held a dozen diamond engagement rings. The woman gazed at them with fascination and began to examine each in turn. When she asked for the respective prices, the man did not blench at the high cost. Mildred was encouraged. She was both furthering their romance and doing good business at the same time. While the woman was full of questions about the various stones, the man simply looked on. He was there to pay. All that he wanted was for her to be happy.

"While we're here," said the woman, "we may as well see them all. Could I trouble you to get the others out of the window as well?"

"Of course," replied Mildred. "Look at the full range."

"They're so beautiful!"

"Just like you," said the man into her ear.

Mildred heard the surreptitious whisper and smiled. They seemed such a happy couple. There were three more trays of rings in the window and she had to stretch in order to retrieve them. It took her a little while before all four displays were side by side on the counter. Some of them could be discounted immediately, but the woman did pick out a sapphire ring to try on. After flexing her hand, she showed the ring to the man.

"Is that the one, darling?" he asked.

"I'm not sure." She selected a ring from the first display. "The diamond was my favorite at first but the sapphire is so gorgeous." She smiled at Mildred. "Might I ask how much it is?"

"Money doesn't come into this, Venetia," he said.

"I'm interested to know."

"They're virtually the same price," said Mildred. "They're also two of the best rings in the shop. I congratulate you on your taste."

"Venetia has excellent taste," boasted the man. "That's why she chose me—isn't it, darling?"

But the young woman was too preoccupied with comparing the rings, holding them side by side, then removing one so that she could try on the other. She slipped it off her finger and gave it to Mildred.

"It's between these two," she decided.

"Toss a coin," suggested the man blithely.

"David!"

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"Well, we can't take all day."

"I'd like to think it over. What time do you close?"

"Not until five-thirty, madam," said Mildred.

"Oh, we'll be back long before then. David and I will pop into that Tea Shoppe just up the street. By the time we come out, I'll have decided between diamond and sapphire." She became anxious. "You won't sell either of the rings while we're away, will you?"

Mildred shook her head. "No, madam. I'll put them aside."

"Thank you."

After a last look at both rings, they gave her a nod of farewell and left the shop. Mildred put the rings into a small box and unlocked a drawer under the counter. When the box was out of the way, she began to replace the trays in the front window, taking care not to nudge any of the other items on display. The last tray was the one that she had first taken out. As she picked it up, Mildred glanced at it. Her blood froze. Shorn of its most expensive ring, it still contained eleven others but it was not the number that startled her.

It was the fact that several of the rings were not the ones that had been there earlier. They had been replaced with rings that were similar in appearance but of a much lower value. Mildred had been tricked. While she was reaching into the window, the switch had been made. Her romantic streak had been a fatal distraction. She had just been robbed in broad daylight.

Cyrus Hillier had been enraptured by the performance of *Troilus and Cressida* and Mary Anne had been overwhelmed by the quality of the acting. When the interval came, they were in something of a daze as they made their way up the aisle towards the lobby.

"It's wonderful!" said Cyrus. "A definitive production."

"But not as good as yours," countered Mary Anne loyally.

"I only had amateur actors. These are real professionals."

"I still preferred your version, Cyrus."

"Thanks, honey."

As they came into the lobby, a young man bore down on them.

"Professor and Mrs. Hillier?" he asked.

"That's us," admitted Cyrus.

"Anthony Walker," said the other, offering his hand. "I believe that you've met my sister, Rosalind."

"We have indeed, young sir."

Handshakes were exchanged, then they moved to a corner where they could discuss the play. Anthony explained that his sister had rushed off to the ladies' cloakroom before the general invasion. He shared their enthusiasm for the production though he had severe doubts about the play itself.

"Not the jolliest piece that Shakespeare wrote, is it?"

"It does have its comic moments," argued Cyrus. "There was a

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lot of humor in that scene with Ajax and Thersites."

"But it's still a rather pessimistic play."

"Pessimistic or realistic?"

"Ah, well," said Tony with a grin. "That's a matter of opinion."

"Wait until you've seen the whole play."

"I will, Professor."

Rosalind soon joined them and they had an amicable debate about the theatre itself, all agreeing that it had its shortcomings. It seemed only minutes before the warning bell sounded to mark the end of the interval. Rosalind was saddened.

"We'll have to say goodbye now," she said, "because Tony and I have to dash off the moment the performance is over."

"I thought you were staying at a hotel," said Mary Anne.

"We usually do and we'd have loved to have stayed on so that we could watch *The Merchant of Venice* this evening. But we have to be on the *Shakespeare Express* at five-thirty."

"What a pity!"

"Needs must when the devil drives," said Tony, shaking their hands in turn once more. "But it was a delight to meet you both and I hope that you enjoy the rest of your stay in England."

"Thank you," said Mary Anne. "And goodbye."

After a flurry of farewells, they went into the auditorium. Cyrus and Mary Anne took their seats in the front stalls. Her mind was still on the two friends they had made.

"It's such a shame they have to leave when the play is over," she said. "It would have been nice to have a drink with them afterwards."

"Perhaps," he said quietly. "Perhaps not."

They were soon lost in the second half of the production. It was an exhilarating experience and gave them plenty to discuss when they returned to their hotel afterwards. The evening performance of *The Merchant of Venice* was equally satisfying, though Cyrus felt that the play was inferior to the one they had watched that afternoon. During the stroll back to the Shakespeare Hotel, he explained why. Mary Anne was, as ever, an attentive listener. Cyrus had hoped to continue the conversation over supper, but as soon as they entered the hotel they were intercepted. A stocky man in his forties introduced himself as Detective Sergeant Cyril Rushton and, after showing them his warrant card, asked if he might have a word with them. Mary Anne was patently discomfited.

"We haven't done anything wrong, have we?" she asked.

"Not at all, Mrs. Hillier," said Rushton. "I just need your help." He glanced around. "Is there somewhere private where we can speak?"

"Our room might be the best place," said Cyrus.

"Lead the way, sir."

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Mary Anne was upset at being accosted by a detective, but Cyrus seemed to be completely unperturbed. It was almost as if he had been expecting it. When they got to the room, he sat on the edge of the bed while the others occupied the two chairs. Rushton produced a notebook from the inside pocket of his jacket and flicked through the pages until he found the one he wanted.

"I believe that you know a Miss Rosalind Walker," he began. "It was she who told me where I could find you both. I understand that you met the lady this morning."

"Yes," said Mary Anne. "It was at Paddington Station."

"And you traveled on the train to Stratford with her?"

"We did, Sergeant Rushton. The *Shakespeare Express.*"

"Did you share the same carriage?"

"No, she was in another carriage with her brother, Anthony."

"That's what she claims."

"It's exactly what happened, Sergeant."

"Not necessarily," said Cyrus.

"What do you mean?"

"Let the sergeant finish, Mary Anne."

"But you were *there,* Cyrus. You saw them get on the train."

"Miss Walker also claims that she and her brother attended a matinée performance of *Troilus and Cressida,*" said Rushton, referring to his notebook. "Can you confirm that?"

"Yes," said Mary Anne.

"No," added her husband.

"Cyrus, don't be silly," she chided. "We met them."

"We talked to them in the lobby, yes. But that doesn't mean they actually watched the performance."

"Of course they did. They came into the auditorium with us."

"But did they stay?—that's the question."

"Ignore my husband," she said with a touch of irritation. "He's had a lapse of memory. I can vouch for them. Rosalind and Anthony Walker saw that play this afternoon." She looked at Cyrus. "How can you possibly deny it?"

"Because I don't like being *used,* Mary Anne."

"What are you talking about?"

"The sergeant will explain."

Rushton took his cue. "At approximately eleven o'clock this morning," he told them, "a jewelry shop in Banbury was robbed. The manager was injured in the process. The thief—a young man answering the description of Anthony Walker—got away with a substantial amount of jewelry."

"It couldn't possibly have been him, Sergeant," said Mary Anne defensively. "He was on the train and it doesn't even stop at Banbury."

"Yes, it does," observed Cyrus.

"It's not a proper scheduled stop," continued the detective. "They

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slip a carriage at the station, that's all. No passengers are allowed to join the train."

"But they could leave it."

"They could indeed, Professor Hillier. You stopped at Banbury at ten forty-one. That fits in with the timing of the robbery."

"Did anyone see Anthony Walker leaving the train?" asked Mary Anne, refusing to believe that he could be implicated in a crime. "Well, did they?"

"No, Mrs. Hillier."

"There you are, then."

"You don't understand, Mary Anne," said her husband gently. "Rosalind's brother could not leave the train because he was never on it in the first place."

"Yes, he was. You saw them get on together."

"I saw her get into the train with a young man but there's no guarantee that it was Anthony. Apart from anything else, he lifted his hat to her when they met. Is that the kind of greeting you'd expect from a brother?" He looked at Rushton. "My guess is that it was Rosalind who got off at Banbury."

"Quite right, sir," said Rushton. "The stationmaster confirms it."

"I begin to see why she never mentioned that stop to us. She told us everything else about the *Shakespeare Express.*"

Mary Anne was baffled. "What's going on?" she wondered.

"We were tricked into providing an alibi."

"I don't understand. All that we did was talk to her. In any case," she went on, "how can Rosalind possibly be involved in the crime? The sergeant said that it was committed by a young man."

"We've reason to believe that she was at the wheel of the car that was waiting outside the jewelry shop," said Rushton seriously. "We have a number of witnesses who saw it being driven away at speed by a woman."

"Oh!" Mary Anne was deeply shocked. "Are you saying that her brother was the thief?"

"I doubt very much if he was her brother, honey," said Cyrus.

"Right again, sir," said Rushton. "The second crime took place around two-thirty this afternoon—another jewelry shop, right here in Stratford. This time, both of them were involved. While the manageress of the shop was distracted, they switched expensive rings for cheap ones."

"Two-thirty, did you say?" Mary Anne shook her head. "It wasn't them, Sergeant. They were watching the matinée."

"That's what they wanted us to think," said Cyrus. "And they were very convincing. I daresay they've done this before."

"More than once, Professor," said the detective. "The first time, their target was a jewelry shop in High Wycombe. The *Shakespeare Express* stops there. My belief is that Miss Walker left the train there and was picked up by her accomplice in a car. On the

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second occasion, a jewelry shop in Warwick was robbed. Weeks later, they followed the same routine in Leamington Spa and got away with thousands of pounds' worth of diamond rings. Today, however," he concluded, "was the only time they committed two major crimes on the same day."

"Overreachers," mused Cyrus.

"What's that, sir?"

"People whose greed and ambition drives them too far. It's a concept with which Shakespeare was very familiar, though it's another playwright who gave it real definition. Does the name Philip Massinger mean anything to you, Sergeant?"

"Afraid not, Professor," confessed the other. "I've lived in Stratford all my life but—I'm ashamed to say—I've never once been to a play here. Mind you," he added by way of mitigation, "I was on duty the night the Memorial Theatre burned down in nineteen twenty-six. Who was this Philip Messenger?"

"Massinger—a Jacobean dramatist who wrote *A New Way to Pay Old Debts.* One of its main characters was a ruthless extortionist called Sir Giles Overreach. Like the two people we met earlier, he was brought down when trying to extend his grasping hand too far."

"I still can't accept that they were criminals," said Mary Anne. "They were too nice, too thoroughly decent."

"And we were too thoroughly American, honey."

"What do you mean?"

"That's why we were singled out at Paddington. We looked like a pair of innocent, defenceless, trusting American tourists. Think back. Who initiated the conversation?"

"She did, Cyrus."

"Exactly. She befriended us to secure an alibi and she no doubt chose other unsuspecting Americans on the previous occasions."

"In those cases," said Rushton, "they were never called upon as witnesses because there was no arrest. This time, it was different."

"Where did you catch them?"

"In their room at the Billesley Manor Hotel. They'd driven there to count their takings. It wasn't just the jewelry shops that suffered, you see. The pair of them are accomplished pickpockets as well. They mingled with the crowd at the theatre in search of victims. People are off guard in that sort of situation. After the matinée, the manager had a number of complaints from people who'd been robbed."

"They seem to have followed a pattern," said Cyrus.

"That was their mistake, sir. It all started with the *Shakespeare Express.* They hit a different town each time but always pretended to go to a matinée here."

"And they were arrested in a hotel?"

"In bed together, as it happens."

Mary Anne was scandalized. "A brother and sister?"

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"Incest is the one thing we can't charge them with, Mrs. Hillier. In reality, they're not related and their real names are nothing like the ones they gave to you." He got to his feet. "Well, I'll detain you no longer. Now that I know you won't speak up on their behalf, I'll be on my way. Thank you for your help."

"She picked the wrong dupes this time," said Cyrus, crossing to open the door for him. "I began to suspect that something about Rosalind Walker was not quite right when she pumped us for information. She wanted to know exactly where we could be found. What clinched it for me was her little ambush at the theatre."

"Ambush?"

"The lobby was packed to the rafters, Sergeant. She'd never have found me in that crowd. Knowing that I was bound to buy a program, Rosalind lurked by the counter where they were being sold. When she pounced on me, I knew something fishy was going on."

"You're something of a detective yourself, sir."

"I take no credit. Shakespeare must do that."

"Why?"

"When I watched the second half of the play this afternoon, something suddenly clicked at the back of my mind. It was a speech of Ulysses about Cressida."

Rushton was mystified. "Who are they?"

"Characters in the play. Cressida has just greeted a succession of strangers with a familiarity that appalls Ulysses. I was reminded of the way that Rosalind—or whatever her name is—fell on us at Paddington Station. She was altogether too open and friendly."

"That's what I liked about her," said Mary Anne.

"I was taken in myself at first. Then Ulysses spoke up."

"What did he say?" asked the detective.

"'O these encounterers, so glib of tongue,
That give accosting welcome ere it comes,
And wide unclasp the tables of their thoughts
To every ticklish reader.'"

"That sounds like her, Professor. She could talk the hind leg off a donkey. 'Glib of tongue' sums her up perfectly."

"In short, she was thoroughly un-English. A clear danger sign."

"I didn't see it," said Mary Anne, shaken by the turn of events. "Both of them fooled me. I feel such an idiot."

Cyrus chuckled. "I don't," he said. "It was rather exciting to be caught up in this crime spree and to play a small part in convicting the villains. Their problem was that they chose the wrong profession."

"Did they?"

"Yes, honey. They were both such accomplished actors that they could easily have made a living on the stage. Instead of using the *Shakespeare Express* as a base for their crimes," he pointed out, "they could have caught it to come to work here in Stratford." ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

The Good Daughter

by Melodie Johnson Howe

"Diana, tell Kyra how beautiful she looks," Monique Lancer told me.

Kyra, Monique's daughter, fought back tears as she glared at her reflection in the bedroom mirror. I sat in a silk slipper chair sipping wine.

"It won't do any good, Diana," Kyra snapped. "I'm not wearing this stupid dress." A small figure of a winged angel was tattooed on the curve of her young breast.

"Tell her, Diana."

Monique squeezed my hand; it was a cold, bony reminder that she was one of the most powerful agents in Hollywood. And she had just gotten me a role in a movie with the hot new young actor Jimmy Whitelaw. I had ten lines and had just finished shooting my part. I knew I was on treacherous ground. Not only was I being inserted into the middle of an argument between a mother and daughter, but I was also being commanded to lie. I needed work, so I considered what it would morally cost me to tell a sixteen-year-old girl that she didn't look ridiculous in an evening gown when she did. The gown was a pink strapless affair with a huge ruffled skirt that swept the floor. Scarlett O'Hara going to a 1950s prom came to mind.

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Except for the tattoo on her breast. While I was trying to find the right complimentary words without sounding like a sycophant, Kyra turned her hard little face on her mother.

"Who is this birthday party for? You or me?"

"You, darling, I've already been sixteen. I see no problem with having some of my friends here."

"You don't have friends. You have famous clients."

"Diana is my friend."

"She's hoping you'll take her on as a client. Why don't you tell her what you told me? She's too old!" Now Kyra glared at me.

"I said it would be difficult to take Diana on because there are so few roles for women on the verge of middle age."

On the verge? They went on this way, talking about me as if I weren't there. Just to make sure, I checked my reflection in the mirror. Yes, I was in Kyra's bedroom sitting in the blue silk slipper chair, my long legs crossed, wearing a black suit that showed off my fleshy curves and determinedly blond hair. I could hear guests arriving in the foyer below.

Monique, thin as a sliver of ice, thrust a pink barrette into her daughter's harshly dyed black hair. The severe color turned Kyra's flawless pale skin a dead white.

I took more wine. I was drinking too much. I was drinking in place of good acting roles, in place of sex, in place of a man in my bed, in place of letting go of my dead husband. I was avoiding the void.

Kyra screamed the name "Jimmy Whitelaw!" drawing my attention back to mother and daughter.

"That's who this party is for. Jimmy Whitelaw. Not me! You're just using me."

Jimmy had the enormous ego of a very little man. When I had worked with him he had to stand on what the crew calls an apple box to make him taller. We all had to pretend he didn't have to stand on it. Jimmy loved call girls. He bragged about having them dress in retro 'fifties-style cheerleader outfits or prom gowns. I looked at Kyra wearing her pink pouf of a ball gown. My heart sank.

"Is this dress you're forcing her to wear about Jimmy Whitelaw?" I asked Monique.

"He's taken a liking to Kyra. Who wouldn't?" She fluffed her daughter's hair. Kyra recoiled from her mother's touch.

"He doesn't like women," I said.

"I knew he was a creep," Kyra said.

For the past several years novelist Melodie Johnson Howe has been contributing a short-story-length series exclusively to *EQMM*, featuring Hollywood actress Diana Poole. The author knows of what she writes; she was herself, as she sometimes says, "one of the last Hollywood starlets," appearing with actors such as Clint Eastwood. ✝

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"Be quiet," her mother said, and then stared me down. "He likes women, Diana."

"He's short," Kyra snapped.

"I know the production company paid to have him surrounded by three prostitutes on the set. It's amazing what keeps the costs of making movies so high and my salary so low."

"You got that part thanks to me. And so what if he likes call girls?"

"He likes them dressed the way you've dressed Kyra."

"You want me to go to bed with him! You think that will get him as a client," Kyra fumed. But no tears of a mother's betrayal showed in her eyes. They could have been fighting over, well, a dress.

"It's not as if you're a virgin. You might as well get something for it instead of giving it away free."

"You can't tell me what to do with my body."

"Oh, for God's sake, you call sex 'hooking up.' Having sex means nothing to you. And, I might add, who pays the bills? Who keeps your way of life going?"

As mother and daughter began to go at one another again I picked up my wineglass and purse. At the bedroom door I said:

"Kyra, that's the ugliest gown I have ever seen. Don't wear it. If you do, you'll regret it your entire life."

I walked out of the bedroom. Pausing on the long curve of stairs, I peered down at the famous guests mingling in the marble foyer. There was an overabundance of facelifts. The pulled skin on the women and men shined synthetically in the light of the crystal chandelier. The stars who were invited to Kyra's Sweet Sixteen birthday party were dimming. Monique Lancer's clients were getting old. She needed young blood. She needed Jimmy Whitelaw.

"Diana." Monique grabbed my arm. "Don't you ever tell my daughter what to do. And she's not some innocent child, either."

"And she's not some deal you're hawking, either."

I pulled away from her. Jimmy Whitelaw rushed up the stairs. Not recognizing me, his gaze quickly shifted to the top of the landing and Kyra's door. "Is that her room?" he asked Monique. Anticipation made his voice higher.

She nodded. He continued up the steps and slipped into the bedroom. The deal was done.

"I'm going home."

Standing under the portico, I asked the valet for my car. He stared at me as if I were crazy.

"Sorry, ma'am. We have all these limos coming in. It'll be awhile."

"I'll wait."

I stood there greeting people I knew and being avoided by others whom I also knew. You're never sure why you're being shunned in Hollywood; that's what makes it so insidious. I gave up waiting and walked around the side of the house.

Under the enormous marquee a rap group was performing. The

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noise was deafening and had all the rhythm of an Uzi. Bodyguards with guns tucked under their heavy leather jackets surrounded the stage, protecting the rappers from the famous white audience. I walked across the lawn to the infinity pool; it looked like it was spilling Monique's purified sewage over the hills of Hollywood. The rapper's sounds filled the rich night air, leaving no room for any other sound. There were guards placed around the property. Most of the men securing the party were moonlighting LAPD officers. There was only one who looked comfortable in his suit. He stood by the pool, hands in his pants pockets, looking out at the city lights.

"You a detective?" I asked, trying to talk over the music.

"What?" His dark eyes assessed me like a piece of evidence. He stepped closer in order to hear me.

I repeated my question.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"You look like you're used to wearing a suit."

He laughed. His dark hair was cut short and graying at the temples. He had a high forehead and a nose that looked like it had taken a punch. Men, I thought ruefully. Give them a bashed nose and it only makes them look more intriguing. The music thumped and pestered.

"I didn't know detectives moonlighted. I thought it was mostly motorcycle cops."

"I need the money. Ex-wife. Actually, three ex-wives."

"I can't hear. Did you say three?"

He nodded sheepishly. Then cupped his mouth with his hand and spoke into my ear. "Should I know who you are?" His warm breath tickled my neck. His crooked smile came easily.

"No."

"But I have seen you in the movies."

"Probably. You just didn't know it was me."

"And who is me?"

"What?"

"Your name?" he yelled.

"Diana Poole."

He repeated my name, trying to place me. "I have seen you. But you're right, I didn't know it was you. Do you want to know who I am?"

"Not if you're somebody."

"Just a detective."

"You could be a singing detective."

"Who?"

"A singing . . . Never mind," I shouted. "What's your name?"

"My name? Leo Heath."

"You lied."

"What?"

"You lied! You wrote a book that was made into a movie."

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"Did you read it?" He looked surprised.

"No."

"See the movie?"

"No. I read for a part in the movie. I didn't get it. You earned a ton of money. What are you doing moonlighting?"

"As I said, I have three ex-wives."

"Write another book."

"What?"

"Write another book!" I screamed. The music stopped.

My words hung in the air. My ears rang. We laughed.

"I can't," he said in his normal voice, which was surprisingly soft and intimate. I wondered if the tone of his voice made it easier for him to extract the truth from criminals and victims.

"Why can't you?"

"I have writer's block. Hey, where are you going?"

"You're too famous for me. Besides, my ears are ringing and I want to go home," I said, trying to ignore my body's response to his.

"And where is that?"

"Malibu."

"You must have three very wealthy ex-husbands." He grinned.

"Very perceptive." I returned his smile.

I looked up at the glowing lamp in Kyra's bedroom window and decided I couldn't leave just yet. Somebody had to look after her.

The foyer was empty. All the guests were in the backyard. I went up the stairs and knocked on her door. There was no answer. I went in. The room was empty. Just the pink promlike gown on the floor, the bodice collapsed into its full skirt. The skirt billowed out on the carpet as if it had just parachuted to earth.

Monique swept in. "Where is Kyra?" she demanded.

"I don't know."

"What are you doing in here?"

"I came to see if she was all right. Is that why you're here?"

"Have you seen Jimmy Whitelaw?"

"No."

Her narrow face tightened into anger. "She didn't wear the dress. One of the guests said they saw Kyra outside standing by herself. She was wearing jeans and a sweater. Damn her."

"For a moment I thought you might be worried about her."

"I'm disappointed in you, Diana. I thought you were more sophisticated than you really are."

"You call prostituting your daughter sophistication?"

Her thin body tensed. "I don't know what you're referring to. I suggest that you never repeat that lie to anyone else."

In our world, it's usually the lie that becomes the truth. That's because we don't call it a lie. We call it hype. And hype in our world is morality-free. But I had to give Monique credit at how quickly and brazenly she had turned the truth into a lie. That's just pure power.

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"I guess I'll be looking for another agent," I said.

"Good luck." She didn't mean it. She slammed the door on her way out.

I sat down in the blue slipper chair and faced the mirror. Well, I just blew another connection. I gave my reflection a congratulatory smile. There was some wine left in the bottle, but no glass. I took a drink and stared at the gown.

So Kyra didn't wear it. She had defied her mother. Maybe there was hope, I thought, as I watched a pink ruffle edging the hem of the gown change color. I peered closer. It turned a deeper pink. Then it turned red. The red color grew darker and began to glisten as it oozed free of the hem, forming a small rivulet of blood on the blue wool carpet. I lifted up the skirt. Jimmy Whitelaw was curled into a fetal position. Blood matted the front of his expensive white shirt. His once cocky eyes were now a cloudy blue. I let the skirt flutter back down over him. Maybe Kyra had more than defied her mother.

Had I just experienced a sense of hope? What had it felt like? I couldn't remember.

I walked out of the bedroom and out the front door of the house. I asked the valet if he had my car.

"Oh, sorry. What kind was it?"

"Old green Jag."

He disappeared in the darkness, quickly returning with it. I drove away.

I stopped at the Ralph's Market in Hollywood to pick up some milk and coffee. I needed them. But I needed to do something normal and mundane even more. I had just witnessed a mother selling off her daughter. I had just discovered the dead body of Jimmy Whitelaw. And what did I do? Leave the party. Oh, Diana.

My hands shook as I ground my mocha java beans. I recognized an actress I had recently met. We had both been up for a dog-food commercial. Neither one of us had got it. I attempted a smile but it wasn't in me. And she looked as if I had discovered her doing something she shouldn't have been doing. As if being alone in a market at night picking up a few normal, mundane things to keep her sad, lonely life together wasn't something I should see. Avoiding me, she ducked down another aisle.

I paid the cashier and walked back to my car. As I put the grocery bag in the backseat I noticed my trunk was ajar. I opened it and looked in. Nothing but a flat spare tire and a pink barrette. I picked up the barrette. It was the same one Monique had fastened in her daughter's hair.

I ran through the parking lot out to the sidewalk. As I looked up the street the lights of the oncoming cars momentarily blinded me. Then I saw Kyra. She was sitting on a bus bench wearing a wool cap pulled low. There was no mistaking her upturned nose and pointed chin. I sat down next to her.

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"Go away, Diana. I'm not going home."

"You forgot your barrette. What if I hadn't stopped here but drove all the way to Malibu? What would you have done?"

"Hitched my way up the coast. He tried to rape me. I'm not a virgin, but that doesn't mean I have to allow myself to be raped. Even for my mother. He had his arm on my throat and every time I lifted my head I choked. I felt the gun in his pocket. I didn't even think. I just took it and shot. I hated him. I hate my mother."

Tears glistened on her cheeks. I tried to put my arm around her.

She stiffened at my touch. "I just stood there waiting for people to run up to my bedroom because of the noise the gun made, but nobody did. I guess that fake rap group my mother hired was too loud. I couldn't look at Jimmy's body. I put that stupid gown over him. Then I got dressed and went downstairs and wandered through the party. I really didn't know that many people. Except that they were famous. I saw you talking to a man. You looked happy, Diana. Everyone looked like they were having a good time. Then I walked down our driveway until I saw your car. I tried the trunk. It was open, and I got in." She snuffled back more tears.

"Come with me and tell the police that."

"Are you kidding? I'll have to tell them that Mother set the whole thing up. I can't do that."

"Why? I was there. I'll vouch for you."

"Will you really, Diana?" Teenage sarcasm and distrust riddled her voice.

"You can trust me."

"I don't think so."

We watched the cars race past us. When the light changed red the cars screeched to a stop inches from one another, as if jockeying for a minute piece of space kept them all in the unnamed race.

"You said you used his gun. What did you do with it?" I asked.

She gazed at the nylon duffel bag on her lap. "I need it for protection."

"Jimmy can't hurt you anymore. At least let me take the gun."

"No!" She edged away from me. "How often do the buses come by?" she asked nervously. "I've never taken one." She gripped a twenty-dollar bill in her hand.

"I took buses when I was a teenager. Kyra, I don't think bus drivers make change anymore."

"He will for me." For a moment she sounded like her mother.

"But they don't carry change."

"When you took the bus as a teenager where were you going?"

"I had a job in downtown L.A. I was a fitter's model."

"Then you knew where you were going."

"Let's say I had a destination. Kyra, please let me take you home. Whatever your mother may have done, she wants to know you're okay."

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"Then tell her I'm okay. Also tell her I have a gun."

"Why do you want me to tell her that?"

She peered at me in the shadowy light. "How can you be old and so naive?"

A bus pulled up; its airbrakes made a loud swooshing sound. Its interior was lit up like an all-night Denny's restaurant. We watched the working poor and the illegal aliens straggle off.

"Goodbye, Diana."

I grabbed her arm. She wrenched away and leaped up the steps of the bus. The door clamped shut. It pulled out into traffic. I could see her standing, swaying, talking to the driver. I was sure he would pull over and make her get off. But he didn't. Then she was talking to a passenger who began to make change for her. Just like her mother, she could talk anybody into anything. It was then I realized I hadn't got the destination of the bus or its number.

Two hours later I was drinking a glass of wine on the rotting wood balcony of my Malibu teardown. Next-door, Ryan Johns's house, separated by a narrow path from mine, towered in wealth and importance. I heard Ryan staggering up the steps to his stone balcony.

Swaying, he grabbed the newel post and yelled at me, "You're a bitter, lonely woman, Diana Poole."

"And you're a drunken hack," I yelled back.

This had somehow become our usual greeting.

"Why do you hate me?" he asked.

Ryan Johns was a man who would betray his friends for connections. A man who stayed sober long enough to write what the movie stars and the money people wanted him to write. Then he'd hit the bottle, turning his self-loathing into drunken charm. Did I say betray his friends for connections? Had I betrayed Kyra? If I had gone to help her sooner, maybe I could have prevented Whitelaw's death and kept a young girl from destroying her life.

"I don't hate you, Ryan."

I went into the house and closed the sliding-glass door. I stared at my husband's two Oscars on the fireplace mantel. He had won them for Best Screenwriter on two different movies. They were the only tangible evidence of his life that he had left me besides this house I could no longer afford. We had lived too well, never thinking of the future, or of death. I should wrap them in newspaper and put them in a box, I thought. It was time. And then I felt that deep ache for the need of his arms around me. The doorbell rang.

I answered it. It was Detective Heath. His attitude was casual and threatening at the same time. His charming smile had disappeared.

"According to Monique Lancer, you were the last person she saw in Kyra's bedroom. That is, except for when she discovered Jimmy Whitelaw's body."

"Would you like to come in?"

He followed me into the living room.

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"I take it by your composed reaction to my news that you knew Whitelaw was dead. Did you know Kyra is missing, too?"

"Yes and yes." I sat on the sofa. He remained standing, legs apart, hands jammed into his pants pockets. "But I'm calm only because a certain amount of time has passed."

"Good. I wouldn't want to upset you. Though I could get technical and say you left a murder scene."

"Are you going to?"

"It depends on what you tell me."

I described how I had discovered Whitelaw's body and then he asked: "So where is Kyra?"

"I'm getting to that. On my way home from the party . . ."

"This is after discovering Whitelaw's body?"

"Yes. I stopped at Ralph's Market in Hollywood. I bought milk and coffee."

"You always do grocery shopping after discovering a dead body? What's with you people?"

"Do you want to hear what I have to say or not?"

"Go on."

I told him how I had found my trunk open, the barrette, and then Kyra on the bus bench.

"What bus was she taking?"

"I didn't get the number or the destination."

"She could be anywhere. I'd like to think that you didn't help her."

"If she had taken a chance on me I probably would have. But she didn't. She thought I depended on her mother."

"For what?"

"Any small parts she could toss my way."

"How did you know to look under the evening gown?"

"I saw the blood seeping through the fabric. I lifted the hem and there he was. I put it back down and got in my car."

"With Kyra in the trunk."

"Except I didn't know she was in my trunk."

"Monique Lancer said that Jimmy Whitelaw went up to her daughter's room to escort her down to the party."

"That's not true. I was there. Monique wanted Kyra to have sex with him. Monique thought that would get him to take her on as his agent."

"By pimping her daughter? What is it with you people?"

"That's the second time you've asked that. Do you really expect an answer?"

He looked at me for a long moment, then said, "Someday, but not now."

"By the way, Monique will deny what I just told you. And there's something else. Kyra told me Whitelaw got rough with her. That it was really a rape. From what little I know of him I believe her story."

"Whitelaw was shot."

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"I know."

"Kyra confessed to you, didn't she?"

I nodded. Tears ran down my cheeks. He awkwardly and briskly reached into his pocket and handed me his handkerchief. It smelled of Shalimar.

"Who wears Shalimar?"

"Third ex-wife. Where did Kyra get the gun?"

"She said Jimmy had it in his pocket."

"We can't find it. Does Kyra have it?"

His dark eyes burrowed into me. I was afraid if the police knew she was armed they'd hurt her. "I don't know," I answered.

"For an actress you're not a very good liar. What time was it when she got on the bus?"

"I'm not sure. I left the party around eight-thirty. Between nine-thirty and ten. I'm only guessing."

He reached in his pocket for his cell phone. When he made his connection he snapped out orders to check the bus schedules for the time and the area. Then he added that Kyra might be armed.

"I didn't say she had a gun."

"I didn't either. Why didn't you phone the police after she got on the bus?"

"There was a moment at the party. I was standing on the stairs and watched Whitelaw go into Kyra's room. I didn't do anything to stop it. Her mother and I should be held accountable. Not Kyra." My tears started again.

He slipped the phone back into his pocket. "Doesn't work that way."

He stood in front of the Oscars.

"Did you win these?"

"My husband was Colin Hudson. They're his."

"You were married to Colin Hudson? God, he was a great writer. The Paddy Chayevsky of our time. How long ago did he die, if you don't mind me asking?"

"A little over a year. You want to pick one up, don't you?" I said.

"Do you mind?"

"No."

"Heavy." He weighed the Oscar in his hands and grinned sheepishly. "I suppose everybody says that."

"Take it."

"What?"

"Take it home with you."

"Is this some kind of bribe?"

"I'm trying to let go. Besides, I thought it might help with your writer's block. Or maybe help you understand what kind of people we are."

"You trying to let go of your husband?"

"I think it's about time."

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"Well, if I were you I wouldn't start with giving away his Oscars. I'd do something a little more practical."

"Such as?"

"Find another man." He looked quickly away from me and returned the statuette to its place on the mantel. "Here's my card. It has my cell-phone number on it. If Kyra calls you, or you remember anything else, I want you to call me. Understand?"

"Yes. Here's your handkerchief."

"Keep it."

"No, thanks. I hate the smell of Shalimar."

"So do I. It's suffocating." He threw it into the fireplace. "See how easy it is to let go?"

"You must know. Three ex-wives."

I placed his card on my nightstand. I took a sleeping pill and went to bed. At two in the morning the phone jarred me out of my sleep.

"Diana?"

"Yes?"

"It's Kyra."

I sat up, pulling the covers around me. "Are you all right?"

"I'm going to do the only thing I can. The only thing that will really hurt my mother."

"What are you going to do?"

"What I should have done. You'll be reading about it."

"Where are you, Kyra? Please let me help you."

She hung up.

I thought of calling Monique. To warn her. But of what? I didn't believe Kyra would physically harm her mother. I got up and put on jeans and a sweater, and made myself coffee. At four-thirty the phone rang again. It was Monique.

"I'm in my car on the way to your house. Kyra called. She wants me to pick her up. She wants you to be there, too."

"Where?"

"Near the restaurant at Paradise Cove. I'll be at your house in about twenty minutes." She hung up. Like a true agent, she didn't wait for my answer.

I called Leo Heath. He answered groggily.

"If I tell you something about Kyra you have to promise me you won't show up with an army of cops."

He agreed and I told him that Monique and I were going to pick her up. I didn't trust him enough to tell him that Kyra had told me she wanted to hurt her mother.

"I'll follow you there," he said. "Monique doesn't have to know."

"But she's going to be here soon."

"I'm just down the street from you."

"You live in this area?"

"No. I'm sleeping in my car. My third wife tossed me out yesterday. I haven't had time to find a place."

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"Are you watching my house?"

"Now how can I do that when I've been asleep?"

Monique picked me up and we drove up the coast. Paradise Cove wasn't far from where I lived.

"How did Kyra get to the cove?" I asked.

"Hitchhiked from Santa Monica."

"I wonder why she didn't get dropped off at my house?"

"Maybe she thought you'd call the police."

I tried not to turn around and see if Heath was behind us, but since I didn't know what kind of car he drove I wouldn't be able to tell anyway. "What are you going to do?" I asked her.

"Our lawyer said I'm to take her to him. He would arrange with the police to bring her in. What have I done, Diana?"

I didn't respond.

"I just thought that if she'd given herself to all those creeps, why couldn't she give herself to someone who could help us? I don't know where the boundaries are anymore. Where the lines are drawn. It just seemed that nothing meant anything to her. So why would Jimmy?"

"Kyra called me."

"When?"

"Around two this morning."

"What did she say?"

"She said she wanted to hurt you."

"What does that mean?" Her hands tightened on the steering wheel.

"I don't know. What did she say to you when she called you to pick her up?"

"Nothing. Just that she wanted to turn herself in."

"When I talked to her earlier she implied she had the gun to protect herself against you."

"Does she truly believe I would physically harm her? Oh God, Diana, what have I done?"

We drove in silence. There was a heavy, wet mist and we seemed to be the only people on the Pacific Coast Highway.

"She has a gun, Diana. I'm scared of my own daughter."

"But you said she wanted me to come along. She's not going to harm you if I'm there. Kyra is not a cold-blooded killer."

Tears showed on Monique's face. They looked out of place. I remembered Kyra's tears as we sat on the bus bench.

"Did you ever want to be a mother, Diana?"

"I was more interested in being loved myself."

"By Colin?"

"Yes."

"I was more interested in my career. But I thought I could have it all. Women always get screwed."

I was so tired of hearing women say this. We repeat, "I thought

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we could have it all" like a mantra of self-torture, constantly reminding ourselves of what we hadn't gained. Or if we had, it was tainted by what we had to give up. Why did women think they could escape loss?

As we sped closer to our destination, I said, "My first modeling job was a fashion layout for bathing suits. We shot it at Paradise Cove. I remember I glued fake plastic nails over my stubby ones. They had a live trained seal they wanted me to pose with. He swayed his big head and hit my hand. All my nails flew off. I was mortified."

"Is there a moral to this, Diana?"

"I was Kyra's age. Sixteen. I was still a virgin. And I was worried about plastic nails."

"Different time."

"Now we have acrylic nails and no virgins. Do you love your daughter?"

"Of course," she said matter-of-factly. And I felt chill.

Turning left, Monique guided the Mercedes down a steep road into the cove and the restaurant's empty parking lot. I looked in my side-view mirror. I thought I could make out the shadow of another car behind us. The Mercedes' lights pierced the mist. I put the window down. The sound of the ocean crashing against the shore and the thick, damp, salty air filled the car. My heart pounded.

"Do you see her?" Monique asked breathlessly.

"No. Drive slower."

"Oh, Diana," she murmured. "I'm afraid of her. Afraid of my own daughter. You talk to her. I can't."

"Stop!"

She slammed her foot on the brake. We both lurched forward as the car skidded to a stop.

"Did you see something? Hear something?"

I peered out the window.

"Is it Kyra?" Monique asked.

I opened the car door. With the car's headlights as a guide, I slowly approached what appeared to be a bundle of clothes on the asphalt. But my gut knew it wasn't just clothes. It was Kyra. She was curled in the same fetal position as Jimmy Whitelaw had been. The right side of her head had a bloody hole in it. A gun rested near her hand. Monique got out of the car.

"Kyra? Kyra!"

"Stop her!"

Confused, I turned and saw Heath running toward us, yelling, "Stop her!" Monique fell to her knees and pulled Kyra's body to hers. She began to rock her, and sob. I stepped back and felt Heath standing behind me. Trembling, I wondered if this was what Kyra had meant about hurting her mother.

Heath rested his hand on my shoulder for a moment.

"Stop her from what?" I asked.

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Instead of answering, he impassively studied a mother holding her dead daughter. He looked like a director who was unable to get the scene to work right.

"Evidence. Contaminated now," he said to no one in particular.

Kyra's death was declared a suicide. Hollywood closed ranks around Monique Lancer. Her client list might be ageing but she still had power. The rumor that she had prostituted her own daughter was said to be scurrilous and spread by those who had personal axes to grind. And the hot new Jimmy Whitelaw was quickly forgotten. His unfinished movie was dumped along with my ten lines and one closeup. But the image of Kyra huddled in death on the cold asphalt of the parking lot never left me. I couldn't forget her telling me that the gun was for her own protection. And then there were Heath's words: *contaminated evidence.*

A few days later I called him and asked him out to dinner. We met at a restaurant near my house.

"Are we on a date?" he asked as we sipped our drinks.

"No. I mean, I hadn't thought of it that way."

"You want something. What?"

"I'm a woman who lives a chaotic life and I would like to tie up some loose ends."

"I like tying up loose ends. Are you sure we're not on a date?"

"I think Monique killed her daughter. I also think she wanted me to be a witness."

He sat back. "You mean Monique wanted you to see her discovering the daughter she had just murdered. But Kyra said she wanted to hurt her mother. Wouldn't suicide do that?"

"It would hurt Monique more if she came back home. If she told the truth."

"About her trying to prostitute Kyra."

"Yes. Right now it's just a rumor. Hollywood can deal with that. It's the truth we have trouble with."

"So you're saying what?"

"I think Kyra called to have her mother pick her up. I think Monique went to Paradise Cove and shot her with the gun Kyra had. Then called me. Remember she was only twenty minutes away when she called. About the time it takes to get from the cove to my house."

"And what proof do you have for all this?"

"You said it. She contaminated the evidence by holding Kyra to her own body."

"That's not proof. To a jury that's a mother grieving."

"You're a detective. Doesn't it bother you that she could get away with this?"

"People do get away with murder, Diana."

"I guess my only hope is that she gets drunk one night and the booze and the guilt get the best of her and she confesses."

He studied me for a moment, then said, "There is one thing

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Monique Lancer could do that would at least let you know she did it."

"What?"

"Take you on as a client."

"What would that prove?"

"You're the one who knows for sure she was using Kyra to get Jimmy Whitelaw. If she did kill her daughter, she'd be even more worried about you. But taking you on as a client would give her control over you. Make you hers. Ease her worries."

A loud noise came from the bar area as a man fell off his barstool. Two waiters picked him up. It was Ryan Johns. As they dragged him out of the restaurant he spotted me and yelled, "Diana, you're a lonely, bitter woman."

The diners peered at me. There was a ripple of laughter. Heath raised his eyebrows.

"Ryan Johns. He lives next-door," I tried to explain.

"Are you a lonely, bitter woman, Diana?" Intimacy warmed his voice.

"Are you a lonely, bitter man?"

We leaned closer, our lips touching. I took Leo Heath home that night. I let myself experience the warmth and passion of another man in my bed.

When I got up late the next morning he was gone. There was no note. In the kitchen I checked my voice mail. He had left a message.

"I had an early meeting. I didn't want to wake you. I thought of writing you a note, but I have writer's block. I'll call you in a little while." I smiled as he hung up.

Then I heard Monique Lancer's voice. She asked me to come on board. To be her client. After all, we had been through so much together. How could she not take me on? "I'll call again. We need each other, Diana," she added, then hung up.

My skin turned cold.

I took my coffee and stood on my deck and breathed in the morning air and thought of Kyra and me sitting on the bus bench together. I had let her go. I should have held on to her tight. You only have such a short time to hold on to the living.

Someone yawned loudly. I peered over the rail. Ryan Johns was passed out on the walkway. I put my coffee down and grabbed the hose that was curled in the corner and turned it on full force. I aimed it at him. He jolted up, shaking like a bear.

"Jesus Christ, Diana."

"I'm not a bitter woman."

"What?" He staggered to his feet.

"Lonely. And very, very sad. But I'm not bitter."

"Does that mean I'm not a hack?"

"No!" I went into the living room.

The phone was ringing. ●

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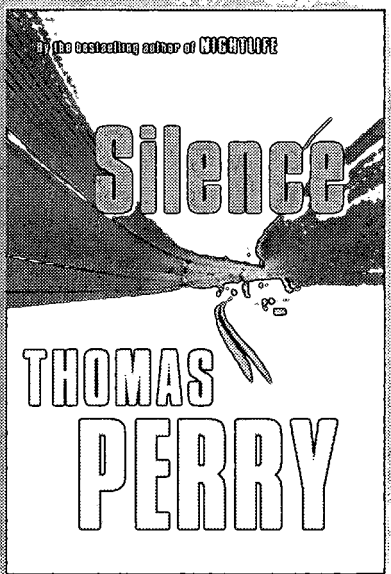
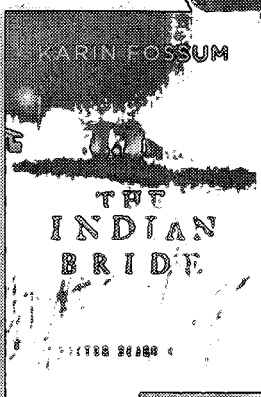
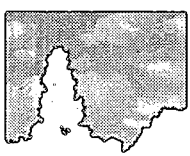
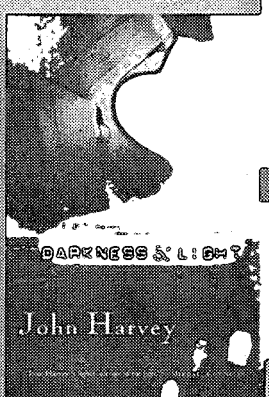
Harcourt & Otto Penzler: Partners in Crime









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THE ESTATE

by Peter Turnbull

MONDAY

Oddly, it reminded Hennessey of the folk song—the leaf on the twig, the twig on the branch, the branch on the tree, the tree in the wood, all down in the valley-oh . . . because here was the land, and here was the house, and here was the garden, and there was the shed and the bottom of the garden, and there was the body. All down in the valley-oh. . . .

Except it wasn't a valley. There are no valleys in the Vale of York, which is really one huge, flat-bottomed valley—not real valleys, such as there are to be had to the north or the west. This was only a small, narrow indentation which was known locally and unofficially as "the valley."

George Hennessey turned from the sun-decayed corpse of a male who had died in youth, lowered himself beneath the blue and white police tape that cordoned off the area behind the rotting potting shed where the body was found, and walked through the knee-high grass to where Yellich and Louise D'Acre stood. "Who found the body?"

"Don't know, sir." Detective Sergeant Yellich brushed a fly from his face. "Anonymous call. The officer who took the call said the voice sounded young and agitated."

"Young?"

"A teenager, a young teenager, thirteen or fourteen . . . so he thought. A very nervous voice, shaking with fear, told us a body was lying at the bottom of the garden of the Old Rectory 'in the valley,' then put the phone down. The officer who took the call has some knowledge of this area and knew what was meant by 'the valley.' Sounds a bit to me like a youth and his mates were exploring the old house, found the body, acted responsibly and called us. Got a fright, all right . . . these deserted old houses are a magnet for youth, especially in the school holidays. I did the same thing when I was a lad."

"Can't blame them, as you say, few of us have gone through boyhood without exploring a derelict building." He turned to Dr. D'Acre.

Chief Inspector Hennessey and Detective Sergeant Yellich, the protagonists of several recent *EQMM* tales, including this one, are also featured in a series of novels by England's Peter Turnbull. The latest one to see print in the U.S. is *Chelsea Smile* (Severn House/ May 2007). We'll have more from Mr. Turnbull later this year.

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"I don't know and I don't know." She smiled. "I anticipate your question, Chief Inspector." She held eye contact but her manner was that of professional detachment. Hennessey could detect no trace of emotion. Aloof almost. "I don't yet know how he died, and I don't know when he died. But think in terms of months. You've seen the extent of the decomposition." She was a slender woman, short-cropped dark hair, greying at the roots, no makeup save for a little pale lipstick upon a smooth, balanced, very feminine face.

"Aye . . ." Hennessey looked about him. The overgrown garden, the crumbling house, the rotting outbuildings . . . under a vast, blue, cloudless sky over which a jet plane, flying from Continental Europe to North America, was drawing a slender white vapour trail. Hennessey imagined the captain speaking. "We are now flying over the north of England, passengers on the starboard side of the aircraft may be able to see the city of York . . ."

"It's easy to see how the lad or lads got in, sir."

"Lads." Hennessey smiled. "Exploring old houses is a group activity. But continue, please . . ."

"Gate at the bottom of the garden, smashed off its hinges, the wood is so rotten it crumbles to the touch. It leads to a service road, which leads to a minor road, which leads to the main road. The nearest village is Little Haxty, with Great Haxty a quarter of a mile beyond. Village boys letting the devil make work for idle hands."

"Well, I hope they got frightened back to the safety of the village green and a harmless game of cricket." Hennessey looked at the house. All the windows were broken, but the roof seemed to be intact. If the internal timbers were sound, the structure could be rescued. The renovation of old buildings was something Hennessey greatly approved of. But he loathed property developers who destroy town centres to build multi-storey car parks or plough up green fields so as to build hypermarkets on the edge of cities. "I wonder, do you think we have caught the extent of the crime scene, Sergeant?"

"Sir?" Yellich raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Well, I notice that you have drawn quite a small crime scene around the body."

"Well, that's where the body is . . . behind the shed . . . between the shed and the wall."

"In a garden like this?" Hennessey swept his hand over the waist-high grass in which he and Yellich and Dr. D'Acre stood. "Are you sure there are not more bodies hereabouts?"

Yellich's jaw sagged. "I'll . . . I'll get right on it, sir."

"And the house too, Yellich. My waters tell me that that building has secrets to tell."

"Yes, boss." Yellich turned and addressed a group of uniformed police. "Constables . . . Sergeant . . ."

"Dr. D'Acre," Hennessey said with a smile, "can we ask you to remain for a while? I have a feeling that your presence will be

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further required."

"I can wait, of course." She was dressed in a green disposable coverall, latex gloves, and a paper hat with an elasticated rim. "But that body, *the* body so far, can be removed if you have taken all the photographs. . . . If you do that, I can begin to collect insects from beneath the body to help ascertain the approximate date of death. Not the time—the exact time is largely a media invention—but it seems we are beginning to take on that responsibility now."

"Life imitating art?"

"It's not supposed to. Well, I'll wait in my car . . . I have a flask of tea. . . . There's nothing to pull me back to York City Hospital, it's quiet at the moment. It happens like that . . . quiet then busy, then quiet again, but I know what you mean about this garden, and the old house. There's a coldness here, even on a day like today."

There were, in the event, three more bodies discovered, all in the house. One body on the stairs, with a knife in hand, two more in an upstairs room lying amid antique clocks, watches, porcelain, gold and silver jewellery, and small, easily handled oil paintings.

After a careful examination of the bodies, Louise D'Acre said, "They died about six months ago. On or shortly after the eleventh of January."

"Oh?" Hennessey was impressed.

Dr. D'Acre handed him a copy of the *Yorkshire Post.* "This was on the floor beside one of the bodies. It's folded to the racing page, as you see, with one or two horses circled. . . . Someone fancied Dancing Lady in the three-ten at Uttoxeter. Ten to one . . . not the sort of odds I'd bet on—were I a betting lady. This sort of observation is often a better way of determining the time of death than is medical evidence. Now . . . how they died. Head injuries to the three in the house. Still not sure about the cause of death of the body in the garden. All young males. There was an explosion of violence here."

"We'll see what we find out."

"Well, I'll get back to York City, prepare the postmortem laboratory. What did I say about a quiet period? . . . Nothing happens then they all come at once."

"Bananas," Hennessey offered.

"What?!"

"I once heard that folk in Wales call their buses 'bananas' because instead of one every ten minutes, three arrive together once every half-hour. . . . They come in bunches, you see."

"Ah."

Hennessey leaned back in his chair and studied the sketch he had drawn. Two bodies on the first floor, one body on the stairway holding a knife which had been stained with what he confidently expected to be blood, and a fourth body found at the bottom of the garden. "The knife is interesting."

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"It is, isn't it, boss?" Yellich sat forward, elbows on his knees. "What were they doing, defending their territory? Were more people involved, or was it a gang of four fighting amongst themselves?"

Yellich looked at Hennessey, the silver hair, the liver-spotted hands, the look in the eyes of wisdom and wounding. "All questions will be answered in due course, Yellich. The booty, any news on that?"

"Well, it has yet to be identified, sir, but the inventory tallies with the items stolen from Lorriston Hall."

"Does it indeed?" Hennessey smiled. "I remember that burglary, clever neutralising of a complex alarm system. The thieves hid in the grounds for a day or two, actually made a camp with a fire . . ."

"Huge grounds, sir. They were well able to do that."

"When was the burglary?"

"Night of the ninth/tenth of January this year."

"So they did the burglary, made their way out of the grounds a day later, and drove to the Old Rectory to hide the loot, and on the way they stopped so one could buy a copy of that morning's *Yorkshire Post*. Cool customers."

"Job for the collator, sir, I've asked him for information about missing persons in the York area, males, twenties, reported in January." Yellich glanced at his watch. "Won't get a result today now. I should think there'll be something for us early tomorrow."

Yellich drove home. He found his wife leaning against the working surface of their kitchen. "Jeremy?" he asked.

"He's been impossible."

Yellich went into the sitting room. His son, he saw, was sitting cross-legged in front of the television, his eyes too close to the screen. The boy turned and smiled at his father and Yellich saw again how large he was growing. "Daddy!" he said.

"I hear you've been naughty." Yellich spoke sternly, causing Jeremy to fling himself on the floor in floods of tears. Later Jeremy, clearly wanting to make peace with his father, insisted on showing him that he could count to twelve . . . "So I can count the candles on my birthday cake."

George Hennessey drove home to his detached house on the Thirsk Road in Easingwold, where he was greeted by Oscar, who jumped up at him and ran barking in circles. He peeled off his lightweight summer jacket and made a mug of tea which he carried out to the garden where he told his wife about his day. An observer would see a silver-haired, middle-aged man talking to himself, but Hennessey felt Jennifer's presence in the garden, her garden, which she had designed while heavily pregnant with their first-born. Then she had died. She had folded and collapsed one hot afternoon in the centre of Easingwold. Sudden Death Syndrome: aged twenty-three years. But she was in the garden, her ashes had been scattered there, but more

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than that, more, more, much more, her presence was in the garden, and when Hennessey had stood in the garden as he told Jennifer about a new love in his life he felt a rush of warmth come over him.

He ate his evening meal, a simple beef casserole, phoned his son, now a barrister with a family of his own, read an account of the Battle of Waterloo, walked Oscar, and then walked out again for a pint of stout at the Dove Inn, just the one, before last orders were called.

TUESDAY

Yellich showed the list to Hennessey. "Ready and waiting in my pigeonhole as I thought it would be, sir. It could only be our four."

"Three brothers, and a fourth man." Hennessey pondered the list. "Do we know them? Their names are familiar, I think."

"We certainly do, sir, the infamous 'Dee Quinn' family. Father and mother are longtime petty felons, David and Dorothy Quinn. Once married they had the same initials, D.Q. . . . what a wonderful method of confusing the law, they thought, so their children were all D. Quinn as well: The girls were Diana and Dana, the boys, as you see, were Dean, Daniel, and Dermott. They live on the Oakleaf estate, and even for that estate, the 'Dee Quinns' are bad news."

"And the other name? Bobby Bishop?"

"Not known to us, sir, but he lives, or lived, on the Oakleaf estate. As you see, reported missing at the same time as the Quinn brothers. And that estate being what it is . . . crime is a way of life there, so much so that it's not seen as crime unless certain rules are broken. . . . The estate is a law unto itself. If you leave something lying about and it gets stolen, you don't complain, but murder is out."

"I'm relieved to hear it." Hennessey grinned. "Time to pay a call on the Quinns."

The Quinn household was in the centre of the Oakleaf estate. The front garden was overgrown, the paint peeled from the door, and bits of an old motorbike lay strewn on the path. One window frame was broken and had been boarded up with cardboard. Hennessey knocked on the front door. It was flung open by a short, stocky man who glared at his callers with eyes set deep in his skull. "You police?"

"Yes." Hennessey reached for his ID.

"You don't need that. You've got police written on your forehead, and I recognise that one." David Quinn pointed to Yellich. "He lifted me once."

"Mr. Quinn, we may have some bad news for you."

"Oh. . . ?" His look remained aggressive. "My boys?"

"Probably."

He took a deep breath but restrained his emotions. The estate hard man wasn't going to let his weakness show. "Tell me."

"Four bodies have been discovered. They still have to be identified."

"I'll do that. I knew. Told them it was too big."

"What was?"

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"Lorriston Hall. Shouldn't have done palaces . . . but would they listen? Should have kept their crooking small-time while they were still only in their twenties. What happened?"

"We don't know yet. The bodies were found in the Old Rectory near the Haxtys."

"Aye. . . ." The man nodded. "They got out. . . . I read of the burglary. I thought the big man had sent a private team after them, but they got to the Rectory?"

"Yes. You know it?"

"Aye . . . they used it to store treasure."

"Treasure? Is that what you call it?"

"So what's wrong with the word? Can't stash it here, you busies will come crawling all over the house. They had to stash it somewhere while they got rid of it, a bit at a time. They took quarter of a million pounds' worth, they'd be lucky to get twenty thousand for it, but that's not bad for a night's work."

"We recovered the 'treasure.' It was all still there and a newspaper bought by one of the gang on the morning of the eleventh. So what happened to your sons and Bobby Bishop happened on the second night after the robbery."

David Quinn nodded slowly. "It's that Bobby Bishop. I warned them about the Bishops. 'Don't go near the Bishops. . . .' I said that. They're not hard, but they have no honour. I knew Terence Bishop, his father, when I was in Armley Gaol. Devious . . . like father, like son. . . . Three brothers, that's loyalty, that would work, but bring the likes of a Bishop in and he'll turn on you . . . that's what happened. . . . He wanted the treasure for himself, got all three somehow but one managed to get him . . . I know. I just know that's what happened. I know my boys, I know the Bishops. When can I see my boys?"

"You can't. . . . They died six months ago. I'm very sorry. It's going to have to be a case of identifying them by their dental records. . . . If you could tell us the name of your dentist?"

"The Dental Hospital. This family has been struck off the list of every doctor and dentist in York."

"Thanks. And sorry . . . "

"Aye. Bishop would have jumped them. It would take a Bishop to do that. They wanted him because he could get past the alarm system, but that didn't mean he wouldn't jump them after it was done."

David Quinn was hostile, but there was something honest about him. Terence Bishop, by contrast, was slippery by nature; Hennessey couldn't get hold of him. Getting hold of Terence Bishop's personality was like trying to nail jelly to a wall. He left his wife to take the brunt of the bad news and tell the police the name of their dentist. He was small, weasel-like. And what was that? No . . . a smirk at his wife's distress? No, no, no, surely, surely not . . .

Hennessey and Yellich returned to Micklegate Bar Police Sta-

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tion. In Hennessey's pigeonhole was a copy of Louise D'Acre's post-mortem report on the four bodies found at the Old Rectory:

Body one—upstairs	Died of massive head injuries consistent with being struck from behind with a heavy, flat object. Death would have been instantaneous.
Body two—upstairs	—ditto—
Body three—found on the stairs with knife in hand	Also died of head injuries; less severe than bodies one and two, but would have been fatal. Also has a broken arm (defence injury?).
Body four—found in the garden	No discernible cause of death on skeleton. Tissue too decomposed to retain indication of wounds such as stabbing. But blood on the knife is that of body four.

Hennessey put the report down. So that was it. Quinn senior was probably right. The dental records would show the body in the garden to be that of Bobby Bishop. So he jumped them, got two, the third managed to knife him before being struck a lesser blow to the head. Bobby Bishop staggered downstairs, dying; the third Quinn staggering after him, also dying. Bobby Bishop staggered into the garden in a daze, not knowing where he was going, and found himself behind the garden shed, where he expired. And that was that. All contained, no fifth or sixth person, no multiple murderer to seek and apprehend, here victim and villain were one.

That night, after feeding and exercising Oscar, Hennessey packed an overnight bag and drove to Skelton, to a half-timbered black and white mock-Tudor house. He walked up the gravel driveway and tapped on the door. When it was opened he said to the slender woman who stood on the threshold, "Sorry I'm late."

"It's all right." Louise D'Acre smiled. "The children have quietened. We can go straight up."

At the same time that George Hennessey stepped over the threshold of Louise D'Acre's house, David Quinn walked out of a house. He walked to the street and sat on a low wall, bloodstained knife in hand. He was surrounded by a small, silent crowd of onlookers. He sat there waiting for the police to arrive because he had just stabbed Terence Bishop through the heart. That was the way of it on the Oakleaf estate. ●

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My Funny Valentine

by Frank Wydra

Since Frank Wydra's *EQMM* debut in the March/April 2007 issue he has sold a story to *AHMM* and written an article for *Firsts, The Book Collector's Magazine,* on collecting the work of fellow Michigan author Loren D. Estleman. He returns to *EQMM* with a new P.I., Gabe Sparks, though on this case, Gabe isn't working for money.

My opinion, Nick would have preferred "St. James Infirmary" to the "Amazing Grace" oozed by the quartet. But given his vantage point from inside the closed coffin, he was no longer doing the choosing. I, on the other hand, rather liked the syrupy tune, sort of spiritual, the way it should be, given the occasion.

Me, I'm Gabe Sparks. Nick considered me his best friend, and I guess we did go back almost to the beginning of time. So, if anyone was going to tell them to jazz it up, it should have been me. But with all the women around, each trying to be in charge, I just let them drone on, one sad tune after another.

Homicide said it was a letter bomb, and when I went down to do the ID, I'd have to say whoever sent it used Priority Mail. Not much left to identify; most of the face, hands, and a good piece of his chest were gone. Yet there was always something about Nick Zero that set him apart. So from the bits of skin and hanks of hair that were left, I knew it was him. No next of kin, they said, and I guess I knew that, too. It was sobering to know that with all the women in his life, he'd put me on his wallet card as the emergency contact. After the ID, I made the calls, picked out the polished ebony coffin, and ran the announcement of his demise. Not first choice on how to spend a Friday afternoon, but as far as I knew, there was no one else.

I'd picked a small parlor for the memorial and arranged a cremation afterwards. It surprised me that, even with the burn, you had to buy the coffin. Seemed like a waste of good wood, but if it was to be wasted on somebody, better Nick than most.

The wake was more like a cocktail party than a memorial; waiters in evening clothes passed wine and hors d'oeuvres. I recognized some of the women, but most were new faces. The men seemed disinterested, along for the ride, with no special affinity

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for poor old Nick.

"I'll miss him," I said, "can't believe he's dead."

"That the best you can say?" Connie was something of a scold when it came to the social graces. East Coast money, Wellesley, Hamptons in the summer. For hanging out with me, her family considered her a black ewe. I thought it showed her class.

"Probably as good as he'll get from any man here. Nick was not well loved by the stronger sex."

Connie snorted. She did that whenever I got too chauvinistic for her taste, which is another way of saying she snorted a lot. Her crude demeanor went a long way to explain our relationship. She was her own woman, and there was something about consorting with a private eye that appealed to her sense of adventure. Lord knows why; most of the work was dull, but too much Dashiell Hammett as a kid had warped her values.

"Gabe?" The word was throaty as a Champagne rush with twice the effervescence. The voice, and the marvelously lithe body that went with it, belonged to Charity Schilling, one of Nick's most recent playthings, a striking woman who concealed her good looks by dressing impeccably. Today she wore white-collared black; her mahogany hair was glossy and tight against her head. Long-lashed brown eyes looked straight into mine with more spirit than sincerity. Charity, like Connie, was from old money, but there the similarity stopped. The four of us had doubled to see Garth Brooks once, and Nick had briefed me beforehand. Old Man Schilling, Charity's grandfather, made his fortune in electricity. He was one of those businessmen who were as good at making money as they were bad at building relationships. The traits reversed themselves in her father, who—while a charmer—managed to lose half the fortune.

"Hi, Char," Connie said before I could. "Condolences, I think."

She dropped her eyes. "Thanks. He was special."

From what I'd seen of her eyes, he wasn't special enough for tears, though as Connie had drilled me, it's uncouth to show emotion in public. I guess with a little money and the right upbringing, you can faucet it on and off.

"We'll all miss him," I said.

"Yes," she said, bringing the dry eyes back into mine. "I was wondering, well, actually, Nick said if anything should happen to him I was to go to you, said you'd know how to handle things."

"What kind of things?"

She looked around as if gauging the earshot. "Private things."

I could feel Connie move closer so as not to miss any of it. I dropped my voice as if that would make what she was about to say more private. "Such as?"

"You know how Nick was with money."

In fact I didn't. He always seemed to have enough, lived well enough to have a love nest in addition to his regular apartment.

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But as to the volume of its flow, I'd never asked, nor had he told me. Between real men, talk of making money was a natural but how much of it you had was off-limits. The quartet slipped into their rendition of "Danny Boy," which other than being a song about death didn't figure at all. The only Irish in Nick was Bushmills.

"I loaned him some, sort of an investment."

"A lot?"

"Yes, quite a lot," she whispered. "He gave me some paper and said it was secured by a life-insurance policy, but the paper wasn't signed and I have no proof of the policy. I saw him sign it, the paper, that is, but somehow when I checked there was no signature."

"And you want me . . . ?"

"To find the original and the policy. Can you do that? I'll pay, of course, whatever your rate."

"He could have shredded it," Connie volunteered.

"He'd never do that," Charity said indignantly.

I was about to say, "You don't know Nick," but refrained, knowing she'd known him in ways I never had. "I don't think he had a shredder," is what I said.

"Can I count on you?" Those dark brown, dry eyes of hers boring into mine.

"Wouldn't a lawyer be better at this?" I said, not sure I was ready to start poking around through Nick's stuff.

"Not until I have a signed note. Besides, I'd rather avoid the publicity."

"How much was the note for?" Connie asked.

The quartet was really into "Danny Boy" and it seemed as if all conversation had stopped, either listening to the wailing Irish dirge or for Charity Schilling's answer.

Her eyes shifted around the room, as if deciding whether to say and resolving that she had to tell me if she expected my help. "Half a million."

"Whew," Connie whistled.

"Please," Charity said, ignoring my well-bred companion's breezy response.

"We'll see," I said.

"What's there to see?" Connie asked as soon as Charity had left.

"For one thing, why she wants me snooping around Nick's stuff."

"For God's sake, she told you."

"Maybe, but it's hard to believe that anyone as savvy as Charity would have taken blank paper. She's looking for more."

"Like?"

"Like that policy. If that's her collateral, it depends on who the beneficiary is. If it goes to his trust, she's free and clear. It names a beneficiary, it bypasses the trust. Leaves her in the cold. Besides, seems to me that if you have a note secured by a life-insurance policy, there's only one way to call the note."

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"You mean . . . ?"

"Somebody had to send the valentine."

"Hi, Gabe. Hi, Connie." Desirée Starr wore a low-cut black sheath with a diamond pendant suspended an inch above her considerable cleavage. A blonde by choice, she had the farm-fresh features of an Ohio beauty: rosy lips and cheeks to match, flawless skin the texture of cream waiting to be skimmed from the pail. She hung from the arm of a man who was almost as tall as she, but who had the robust, weathered look of a weekend sailor.

"Hello, Desirée, hello, Dusty," Connie said. I grunted. While I liked Desirée, Dustin was a stuffed shirt, too aware of his own importance to pay me any courtesy. Whether he knew it or not, Dusty, by his wife's appearance here, was in a select group: Nick's cuckolds.

"You know Nick well?" I asked Dusty. Before all the words were out, I felt Connie's spiked heel pierce my instep

"Not well," Dustin admitted, "friend of Desi's. Theater group, wasn't it?"

Desirée gave a weak smile. From her eyes and the hankie wadded in her fist, there was no doubt she had been crying.

"Dusty, darling," she said in an innocent, fresh, little-girl voice, "I left my wine on the table, would you mind?"

"Here," Dustin said, signaling a waiter, "I'll get you another."

"Nooo," she cooed, "mine was just the right temperature. It's right over there." She pointed to a lone glass on a regency table across the room.

As soon as he turned, Desirée said in a low voice, "Nick said if I needed help I was to ask you, and I need help."

I arched my brows. "Nick is generous."

Her eyes rolled heavenward. "Oh, if you only knew," she said. "Time for that later, though." She fingered the diamond around her neck. "See this?"

I peered into her cleavage. "Couldn't help but."

"It's fake. The real one's in Nick's apartment. I need you to get it for me."

"I'm not sure . . ."

She straightened. "Promise," she said, and turned a smile on Dusty, who was returning with the wine.

"Promise what?" Dustin asked.

"To audition for Nick's part in the play. He'd be so good, don't you think?"

"He'd be terrible," Connie said.

"I'll think about it," I said.

As Desi and her mate moved to mingle, Connie said, "You're popular."

"Only basking in Nick's reflected glow."

"Which place does she want you to search, the apartment or the love nest?"

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"He didn't take many to the love nest. Said it was reserved for the crème de la crème." I grinned at my little bon mot. It was not often I was able to gloat with Connie around, but when I could, I took the opportunity."

"You're disgusting," she said, and by the triteness of the comeback I knew I had scored big.

I sensed rather than saw a movement across the parlor that evolved into a parting of the human sea. A blonde, statuesque and poised, flanked by what seemed to be a coterie of attendants, crested the wave rolling toward me. Her black dress, while proper, had a shimmer of blue that gave it an uncommon elegance. Silk, most likely. The neckline modestly covered her throat and she wore no jewelry, not that she needed any. A few feet from me she shrugged off her clique and made the last few steps alone.

"Mr. Sparks?" she asked, her blue eyes boldly holding mine. Either she bleached her brows or the wheat color was natural.

I gave a half nod and she extended her hand. "I'm Gracie Hathor," she said, as if it should mean something. Her grip was strong, her eyes unwavering, though she tended to bat her lashes every third word. Close up, I could see she wore makeup that exaggerated her features, and though I prefer women in their natural state, on her the effect was pleasing. Her nose was straight enough to have had some help and her smile so even that it seemed a fixture.

"Hi," I said, "this is Connie McRath."

She beamed her smile in Connie's direction but didn't offer her hand. "Nick said if I ever needed help, I should call you. May we talk?" She said it with a tone and manner that left no doubt she expected me to walk away from Connie and afford our conversation the privacy of a confessional. Experience told me any such move would have a price far greater than any I would receive from the pleasure of a moment alone with Gracie Hathor.

"Connie's my associate," I said. "Feel free to talk."

I could tell this was not an arrangement Gracie Hathor cherished, yet her alternative was to turn and walk, something I sensed she would not do.

"As I said," she reluctantly continued, "Nick recommended you. I need someone discreet." She paused. I stayed silent, giving her a sense of my discretion; then a light came to her eye. "You don't know me, do you?" The question expressed a revelation, as if I were lonely Diogenes and she my lamp. "I'm sorry," she said, "how vain of me. I'm a minister and most people have seen my show." Her cheeks, even through the pancake, reddened. For the first time her eyes wavered and looked down.

"I have," Connie said. "You're wonderful. Gabe, this is Sister Gracie. Forgive him, Sister, he doesn't do much television."

That seemed to bring her back, and she favored Connie momentarily with her smile. "Thank you. Well," she said, hesitating

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enough to let me know a confidence was coming, "well, even though this is awkward, I need complete discretion. Nick said you could be trusted, and I'd like to take his word, but I need to hear it from you."

I said, "You have my word."

She looked nervously at Connie. What is it about women that makes them suspicious of beautiful women? A sixth sense? Something genetic? I'd, of course, heard all the talk about how candid women are talking to other women, more candid, I think, than I'd ever be with a man, yet when there is reserve between women, the silence seems as barren as a nunnery. She had no reason to distrust Connie, who knew most things I knew. That was the nature of our relationship. And it would probably have been all right for me to relay the conversation, but preacher-lady had a problem with her being there. Instead of alleviating the tension, I relaxed and enjoyed it. Gracie Hathor made a half turn, giving Connie only a shoulder to chew on, which, I suppose, allowed her a sense of privacy. "There were some tapes," Gracie whispered. "Videos."

"You and him?"

"Yes," she said.

"Compromising positions?"

"Not at the time, but my flock might not understand. Whatever your fee, double it."

"I'm expensive."

"Triple it," she said, "but no one is to know."

"How many were there—videos, that is?"

She frowned and the lines above that straight nose folded together like an exclamation. "Six, I think, though there might have only been five. Take them all, whatever you can find. Bring them to me."

"Yours might not be the only ones."

The temperature of those water-blue eyes dropped fifty degrees. "You bastard."

I could tell the sentiment was heartfelt. "Just giving it to you straight, ma'am. Look around, these women aren't here for a sorority meeting."

For all her poise, I sensed she was near the edge. Somehow, I felt this was foreign territory, that her land was always the high ground, where she could command with impunity, where there was never risk or jeopardy. "I'll see what I can do," I said. "Where can I reach you?"

She handed me a card, and without ever looking back marched to her coterie, which fell in step as she parted the people in her flow to the door.

"Angel of the Lord," I said, putting my arm over Connie's shoulder.

"Fallen angel," Connie said. "I heard the part about the tapes."

"Nick always had a sense of humor. Nothing else, he knows how to bring in the business."

She looked at me quizzically. "You going to work for all of them?"

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"Not sure I'm going to work for any of them. Not, that is, unless they can tell me who sent Nick his funny valentine."

"Seems," Connie said, "any one of them might have."

I gave her a squeeze. "You're a hopeless romantic."

Nick kept busy by doing odd bits of consulting, mainly public relations and running political campaigns. He was good enough so that the free press he manufactured usually got the client elected. The job, naturally, thrust him into the arms of opinion makers, by and large the beautiful people, those who assumed they would be listened to simply because they were good to look at. The money was enough to pay rent at the three places he kept: office, apartment, and pied-à-terre. None of them downscale.

Odd man out would have guessed his little love condo as the locale for most of his trysts, but not so. Nick once told me he always had three serious lovers: the *incumbent,* or the current focus of his amorous attention; the *rookie,* or the incumbent-in-training; and the *madam,* or the ex-incumbent on her way out. Age had nothing to do with incumbency. The madam could be twenty-something and the rookie forty. It was all about positioning in his rotational system. Rookies never saw the pied-à-terre; madams saw it less and less frequently until one day they saw it no more. To confound ex-madams, he changed addresses every few years.

It had been there that he had opened the envelope. According to Jamison, the inspector in charge, the bomb had been disguised as a valentine in one of those bulky oversized sleeves. On Christmas or a birthday, the card would have been smaller, but this was a holiday to celebrate love, as if love were a quality measured by size. This one, Jamison said, was red and large enough to easily hold a strip of C4 and a detonator.

Connie dropped me at Nick's office while she went to the mall. Sadie Massichismo, his longtime secretary, was there, though I'm not sure why. Without Nick, there was no business and, of course, no paycheck. She was one of those women who believes she'll be young forever and dresses the part: leathers, boots, tattoo, and six inches of thigh. Pouty lips, wide eyes, and a little too much blush gave her round face the baby look so loved by cartoonists. For my taste, had she dressed down a bit, she would have been attractive, yet I suspect she got first pick at the local stud farm. She'd been at the wake, not mixing, hovering near the casket, but we hadn't talked. A Waterford vase on her desk held a lone blood-red rose, still fed by the little green florist vial, booty from one of the florals.

"Wrapping up?"

"Yeah." There was strain in the voice, as if she'd been sucking sand. "It a problem?"

"Not for me." Big companies give three days' bereavement if you can prove you share some blood. Little operations like Nick's paid

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a wage with no benefits. The time off, if you could get it, was without pay. I can't recall Sadie ever not being there. Either she really needed the money or she didn't want to be out of the action. Last week, I'd have said it was the pay, but now it seemed something more.

Nick's suite was not large, but two steps up from adequate. The anteroom, handsomely paneled in birch with cherry accents, held only chairs, Sadie's desk, and file cabinets. His office—with a cherry partner's desk, bookshelves complete with leaded-glass windows, burgundy leather couch, work table, half a dozen chairs, and a private bathroom with sink, closet, and shower—could have served as an apartment for most bachelors. The artwork was early modern, mainly Dada. A Hausmann photomontage of an angry man with a misshapen head, sword in hand, hung over the credenza. I sat in Nick's seat to see what the world looked like from his side. About the same. Still, it was better than looking at the Hausmann. Sadie fidgeted, as if she wanted to protest my boldness at taking Nick's place. At first I thought her silence was politeness but, remembering her fiery Roman blood, dismissed the notion.

"Sit down," I said, but she didn't.

We talked about Nick and what a swell guy he was. All the while she kept working the office, not doing anything useful, not throwing out papers, just straightening things, moving them from here to there and back.

"How long you worked here?"

"Ever since we started. Never been anyone else."

"What now?"

"Who knows? I got a little money. Something'll turn up. I'm not worried."

"Police been here?"

"Took the place apart. You think a man dies, they'd leave his things alone. No, got to mess with everything. Took the Rolodex and my computer. No respect."

"Won't do you much good."

"Don't tell me." Her voice pitched. "They didn't have to take his stuff like that. How am I going to call people, let them know? About him, I mean."

Dummy that I am, I said, "You liked him a lot, huh?"

For the first time she stopped her fidgeting and came over to the desk, fists clenched, scowl on that pouty face. "He was a shit. Couldn't keep his dick in his pants. Any skirt came by, he'd jump it. It was a job. Nothing to do with liking him. But you get used to it. Year after year, different women. You get used to it."

"That bad. Sorry, didn't realize."

"Look, what do you want?"

"He ever tell you anything happens to him, you should see me?"

The puzzlement crossed her face as she tried to figure the trap.

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"No, what's that mean? He supposed to tell me that? You supposed to do something?"

"No, nothing, just wondered. What I came here for was to see if there were keys to his pied-á-terre."

"And you figured I'd be here?"

"No. Thought the place would be empty. I'd let myself in, get the keys, let myself out."

"And how'd you get in, I'm not here?"

I reached in my pocket, pulled out my pick set, and held it up for her to see.

"So why not use that to get in his place?"

She knew the questions, give her that. "Crime scene. I B&E, it's bad juju. I have a key, makes it easier to talk my way out of a rap if the cops catch me. P.I.-101 stuff."

"Why you want in there?"

"You know me, Sadie. This is what I do. Someone kills Nick, I got to find out who. So, how about the keys?"

She nodded. It was a sad nod. I'm not sure if it was resignation, remorse, or a simple understanding that one way or the other I would get the keys. "Top right."

I opened the drawer and took the small ring from the pencil caddy. "Thanks," I said. "You keep a list of his friends? The ones he invited up?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You're a shit, just like him, asking something like that."

"So where is it, your home computer?"

"I don't need a computer to remember."

"Figures," I said. "How about a list."

She'd typed seven names, but only three had made the nest in the past two years: Charity, Desirée, and Gracie. The order of descension had Charity as the queen mum, so to speak, Desirée the madam, with Sister Gracie as reigning incumbent.

"That narrows it," Connie said. "And all three need a favor. You think Nick's sending a message from the grave?"

"We burned him. But yeah, it's the kind of thing you'd expect."

Except for the mess in the foyer, the apartment was much as it had always been: neat, clean, and impeccably furnished. Not large, but how much room did you need? Most clandestine romance took place in out-of-the-way, one-room motels. This place had a granite-topped kitchenette, chocolate suede loveseats, gas fireplace, quadraphonic sound system with a two-hundred-CD juke, wet bar, and a satin-covered king bed. We'd been here a couple of times before and after a double. Not well enough to know it, but so we could get around. Paper, diamond, and videos were on the shopping list, but if we were going to case the joint, we might as well see what else there was. I slipped on my totes and gloves. The AIDS epidemic taught

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us a lot about how to keep a site sanitary—one small bonus from the lover's disease. "You go light, and I'll go deep," I said. "Anything looks interesting, tag it, put it on the counter. We'll check it later."

Going deep meant removing the backs of pictures, scanning undersides of drawers, and checking the insides of opened cereal boxes. Most thieves were of the wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am variety, quick in-and-outers who would take what they could see and leave the rest. Most people hid things from the in-and-outers. But Nick'd sent at least three lovelies my way, telling me to search the place, and that meant he expected more than an amateur job.

It was an hour and a half before I turned up anything. Meanwhile, Connie had found the videos and diamond—both stashed in the bedroom—and was working her way through the envelopes in the desk drawer. My find was rolled up in a glass stogie holder tucked inside a round Rubbermaid spaghetti-filled dispenser. Freudian or what? I fished the paper out of the tube and spread it on the counter for a quick read. Dustin Starr, it seemed, was not the dupe he pretended. The letter, dated a month ago, advised Nick in most graphic terms of the alterations intended for his body should he fail to terminate his affection for Desirée.

"Take a look," I called to Connie.

"'Balls up your nose'? Is that possible?" she asked.

"Depends on the size of the ball and the nose."

"Nick's nose wasn't that big," she said, which gave me some comfort. "You ever see anything Dusty wrote?" she asked, studying the writing. I hadn't. "No way to tell gender just by the writing, but this seems more like a woman's hand than a man's. See how neat and even it is, and the romantic, cursive style, just the way Sister Theresa taught it in third grade."

"Little sexist, I'd say."

"It's okay for me to be sexist, I'm a woman. But what do you think, am I right?"

"Whether you are or not, it points to motive. Something we'll have to check, see how much Dusty knew."

"Actually, it could have been anybody, even Sadie. All it takes is, make a bomb, drop it in the mail. How hard is it to make one of those, anyway?"

"Not that hard. Mix up some C4, flatten it to envelope size, shove in a detonator, and rig some kind of trigger. Open the card, trigger activates the detonator. Poof. You can make C4 out of non-controlled substances, buy them anywhere. Hard part is the detonator, something to make a spark, set off the C4. But those you can get mail order on the Internet—or at least instructions on how to make them."

"So I'm right, it could have been anybody."

"Well, maybe not just anybody. They'd have to know this address. The way Nick segregated his women, this place is as

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secret as a CIA safe house."

"But at least seven knew." She frowned. "No, wait a minute, not even that many. I found the lease, two years, up in June. We're looking at just three people who could have done it, plus Dusty, here."

She was close. Charity, Desirée, Gracie, and Dustin knew the address. "Five, if you count Sadie."

Connie laughed. "You've got to be kidding. She's got no reason."

"Yeah," I admitted, "you're right. Hot number like her, in her short skirts, good looks, able to pick the litter, she's got no reason. Keeps top-of-the-head tabs on who's in or out because it's her job, not because she's jealous. Not a chance she could fall for Nick and feel cheated that everyone gets a turn on the bed but her."

She gave me one of those looks that told me I was getting close to being in trouble. "Always amazes, the way you respect women. Remind me, I send you a valentine yet?"

She had. And I'd opened it. Sweet thing, must have cost a buck and a half, and the sentiment had been just about right, not that I was going to tell her that part.

It took about another half-hour to finish up, with a copy of Charity's note to show for the time. She'd signed it, but, as she'd said, his signature block was blank. I pocketed the paper and diamond, and dumped the tapes in a plastic grocery bag. Tonight was video time at the Sparks home theater.

The way I worked, most of the time, was to make a list, then check off the items, one by one. Very thorough. Very anal. I still had lists from junior high, but that didn't stop me from having faith in the system.

Faith is a wonderful thing, it gets you over the rough spots of the unknowable. Keeps you from wasting a lifetime pondering the imponderable. Like why anyone would pick Valentine's Day to do in Nick. Could be irony, I guess. Especially if you figure that the name of the day is, in itself, ironic. None of the three St. Valentines was ever particularly known for love. Two had gotten their heads chopped off for having faith in the wrong God. Maybe deep down that was the subliminal message, since it is certainly true that at times the heart takes leave of the head, allowing passion to reign. Why not, then, commemorate the notion of romantic love by pairing it with the name day of saints who had lost their heads? Pavlov and Freud, from their vantage point in hell, would have clinked glasses at the thought.

First on my list was to talk with Jamison at Homicide, then the three lovelies. I moved Gracie to third position, which would give us time to view her on-screen talent. Charity's answering machine assured me she would call back at her earliest opportunity, but Desirée's invitation to come at once was breathless.

"Did you find it?"

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No hello. No "Come right in." If nothing else, Desirée was focused. She looked as good as she had the afternoon of the wake. The black sheath had been replaced by a sweater one size too small and a pair of nothing-between-me-and-my-Calvin Klein jeans. A strand of blond hair artfully escaped the rest to give her a look of practiced whimsy.

I fished the rock from my pocket and dangled it at eye level. "I'd be delighted to come in," I said. That flustered her a bit, but not enough to prevent her from nabbing the pendant. "I have some questions," I said, to let her know there was a price to be paid for the bauble. "How'd you happen to have a duplicate?"

She'd gone tense at the mention of questions—as, I guess, most people who are mixed up in a murder might—but relaxed at the mention of the necklace. "Dusty gave it to me. He had a second made so that I could wear it every day and not worry if the chain broke or something."

We sat in the luxurious living room, far enough into the house to be polite, but not so far as to be intimate. No kitchen table for me, the dick who'd saved her stone, perhaps more. "There's the matter of my fee," I said, and her lower lip drooped a bit; it was the look of a girl who has stolen a kiss and now finds her virginity at risk.

"Yes." She fumbled the words. "Of course. How much?"

"Not much. A few questions, that's all. How are you with computers? Use them much?"

The brows merged, signaling her confusion. "No," she said. "I don't know anything about them. Why?"

"How about Dusty?"

Again bewilderment. "Yes, I suppose; he has one in his office."

"He do the Internet? Surfing and all that?"

"Yes, I guess so, he's mentioned it. Why, what are you after?"

"Nothing, just curious." I pulled out the envelope that held Dusty's letter to Nick, addressed by cursive hand. "Recognize the writing?"

She studied it. "No," she said.

"Not yours?"

"No. What is this? What's in the envelope?"

"Not Dusty's?"

"No. I don't recognize it. Does this have to do with Nick's death?"

I slid the envelope back into my pocket. "Maybe. But forget it. Let's talk about the rock. You were wearing it, the real one, at Nick's." Her confusion seemed to pass but the tenseness returned and with it a sparkle of dew at the corner of one eye. "Special occasion?"

She dropped her gaze and shook her head. "No," she said softly, "I, well, I just wanted to look pretty, and when I wear this I feel genuine, not like I'm in costume for some play."

Tender. "You and him," I asked. "Love?"

The head came up and I could see the dew had ripened to a tender stream meandering down her snowy cheek. "Yes," she said. "I adored him. He was everything a man should be, kind, considerate,

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attentive." An inner light seemed to shine and the radiance warmed her until she seemed to glow. "You know what he did once? It was so . . . sweet. It was spring; we were walking together, down by the river, you know, in the park, by the bend?" I didn't, but she wasn't expecting an answer anyway. From the glaze I could tell she was there, not here. "You know how the park is when it's warm, all the homeless, they seem to be everywhere." There was a little shudder, nice touch, something they would teach in acting school. "I've always avoided them, thought they were just dirty old drunks, but not Nick. He spoke to every one he met, as if they were old friends; he treated them with respect, and as he said a kind word to this one or that, they seemed to take on a dignity. He asked me if it was okay. Asked me if I minded his talking to them, and said if I did, he'd stop, but by then I was beginning to be fascinated. All of them, it seemed, had a story. Most of the time it was so sad, I wanted to cry. It was beautiful what he did. I couldn't have done it, but for him, it seemed natural, like all the flotsam of life were part of his family. That's how he was. And he would have given them, his family, up, if I asked. Do you know how that made me feel? That's all a woman ever wants, just to know that the man she loves would give up all for her."

To me it seemed a high price, but then, I wasn't here to debate the tricks Nick used to snare his prey. She'd answered the question, and that's all I'd asked.

Socrates aside, questioning is a cruel skill, for, in large part, it is the sequence or timing of the query that flushes truth from its warren. For those of us who make a living probing shadowy pits, causing unintended pain is an occupational hazard. "You knew there were others?" I asked.

Her face went blank and her lids batted as if she'd been punched. "Others?"

"Women."

"Other women?"

Knowing the turmoil churning within her, I tried to look sorrowful and nodded solemnly. While her behavior seemed an answer, the question still begged. "Did you know?"

Now the tears came as her spring overflowed. "No," she said, daubing the flood.

Of all emotion, passion is the most difficult to gauge. Hatred, envy, desire, all seem to focus. But passion has a duality that allows it both an inward and outward focal point. While the tears came, I was uncertain if they were for the realization of her own betrayal or because there was no longer an opportunity for her to address, and perhaps reverse, Nick's infidelity. "Did Dusty know about you and Nick?" I asked.

"No," she groaned.

I pulled the envelope from my pocket again and this time showed her its innards.

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Silently, slowly, revulsion creeping onto her face, she read it. "Where did you get this?"

"Nick's. Signed by Dusty."

She had, of course, already seen the signature, but now her eyes flashed to it once again. "No," she said. "It's not his. That's not the way he writes. Besides, he's gay. He could care less what I do."

She knew how to pick them, give her that. "Not that I don't take your word—" She waved me to a stack of papers on the desk and let the silent tears fall in earnest.

Something about a person crying makes you want to reach out and embrace them, assure them that better times lie ahead. A beautiful woman crying is perhaps the saddest sight, because not only does the agony surface, but the beauty withers into something pitiful. I was not good at watching women cry. She was an actor, but if this was acting it was Academy caliber. I lifted the letter from her hand and compared it to some of Dusty's correspondence, then said, "I'll let myself out."

I checked messages; Charity had returned my call. She lived at a tony address, in an upscale house—red brick, pillars, enough lawn to keep a dozen sheep from starvation. Unlike Desirée, Charity was dressed in the style of the common folk: torn, off-the-rack jeans, sweatshirt, worn docksiders and red socks down below. It's a look that only goes with very small or very large amounts of money. Charity, in addition to family money, had worked her way through a couple of lucrative marriages, and was, at the moment, very rich indeed.

"You found it?" she said, assuming the purpose of my visit was to discharge the obligation she'd placed on me.

"Not quite," I said. "Any chance I could see the note, the one Nick gave you?"

She brought it to me, and I compared it to the one I'd taken from Nick's. A quick glance showed me that both mentioned the crucial points of the half-million and the insurance policy as security in the unlikely event of his death. They seemed identical.

"How'd you happen to give Nick the money?"

She gave me a knowing smile. "You mean, did he gigolo me? No, afraid not. It was just something that seemed right at the time, a way to make a little more than I was making in bonds."

I looked at the note again, but the interest hadn't changed, two under prime.

"It was more of an investment than a loan. The interest was there to save me from the tax man."

It didn't sound like any tax advice I'd ever heard, but I let it pass. What interested me was whether the deal she had going, backed by an insurance policy, was motive enough to do in old Nick. "Tell me about you and him," I said.

"Not much to tell. We were friends."

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"Intimate friends?"

Her back stiffened and a hardness fell upon her face. "I'm not sure that's any of your business."

It wasn't, but that was no reason not to ask. "Call it quid pro quo for me going in and searching the place. So, what about it?"

Her hard gaze wavered, dropped, then came back. "Yes," she said, "we were lovers."

"That it? No thoughts of filing joint returns?"

Again the eyes wavered. She'd make a lousy negotiator the way she broadcasted her position. "Well, maybe. We'd talked about it, but neither of us was ready."

"All the eligibles around, why him?"

This time she didn't do the wavering eye thing. Instead, she snorted. "Where've you been? Nobody's eligible. Actually, Nick was, but that wasn't his attraction. If he'd been married, I'd have tried to snare him anyway. He had such a fine mind. He could spot an opportunity that most people would breeze over. One time, I remember, he saw a weather report on TV, cold front heading toward Colombia. While we were sitting there, he picked up the phone and bought all the coffee futures he could find. It was wonderful to watch him. Not a drop of sweat and he was risking more than I'd made in a lifetime. It was as if he'd been born in the crucible. A week later, after the frost hit, he dumped them and pocketed half a million. It sent a thrill through me just to watch him. That's the kind of man he was: strong, decisive, savvy. You don't find 'em like that anymore."

I didn't mention that the little speculation might have caused some low-rent folks to go without caffeine, but I think the sentiment would have been lost in the glow of her admiration. "Sort of swept you off your feet?"

"You might say that."

I had said it, but that didn't make me believe it. "So why all the worry about the note?"

"If Nick were alive, I'd have no worry. With him dead, who's to say what happens to my money?"

"It's been awhile since you've seen him, right?"

The eyes wavered. "Not that long."

"How long?"

"We'd sort of drifted lately."

"Lately was about two months ago, I'd guess, just before the holidays." A not-so-wild guess on my part. That's when Nick usually broke it off, said Christmas depressed him. I always thought it an excuse for getting a new present, one wrapped in soft, female flesh. "I don't want to be indelicate, but you knew Nick was seeing other women?" Actually, delicacy was less a concern than seeing how'd she'd react, but if I was looking for surprise or hurt, or shock, I'd have to look under a different rock.

"I'd be surprised if he wasn't. Nick was not a monk. A man as

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worldly as he must have had many relationships. But I'm not sure where this is going."

"Nowhere, actually, but seems to me, if he was as savvy as you say, there'd be no need for collateral like the life-insurance policy."

She signaled again. I'd come close to a nerve.

"It was something my grandfather taught me. Always get collateral."

"You never did answer about the deal, the one he was going to put you on to."

"Oh, that." I waited, knowing silence is a cure for stuck tongues.

"It had something to do with the Internet."

"You pretty good on a computer, surf the 'Net and all that?"

"Good as anybody, I guess. There's a lot of financial stuff out there." Now that we seemed to be off Nick, she relaxed a little and the charm she'd inherited from her father seeped through the granite composure. "I don't spend more than an hour or two a day at it. Why?"

"That much? This deal Nick was getting you into, have to do with hard-core porn? So much a call? Something like that?" Wild shot, but if Nick was into the Internet, sleaze made sense.

"You'd better be going," she said, and I knew I'd hit the mark.

"Wasn't really love between you, was it? Just a business deal."

She stood up, intent on seeing me out. Our little tête-à-tête was definitely over, but I could still dazzle her.

"Mind if I show you a little trick?" I didn't care if she minded, so I took the note I'd brought from Nick's over to the table lamp and held the bottom of the page near the bulb. "Consider this a bonus."

She walked over to see what I was talking about, and just as she got there the heat began to have its effect.

"I'll be damned," she said. "It's signed." She took the paper and studied it. "It's his signature. How'd you . . . ?" The ink was already fading.

"Nick had a bad habit of pulling little tricks on people. As you said, he was one of those who liked turning up the heat, so when you told me you'd seen him sign it, I just figured. You want that one, you can have it, too."

Connie had spent the afternoon previewing the tapes. By the time I got there she was spaced out on buttered corn.

"How'd it go?" I asked.

"Sister Gracie is hot stuff," she said. "I think I learned some new moves. We have five tapes of her and six of assorted others. Want to see?"

"I'll take your word. I have an appointment with her after she finishes this week's version of the Lord according to Gracie Hathor."

"Funny thing, all these tapes, you never see Nick's face, as if he was incognito. The camera's stationary, but there must be a bunch

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of them and they pan all around getting some pretty explicit shots, but never, not once, does he show up."

"Maybe it's not him."

"No, it is."

I gave her a questioning look. It's okay for me to be able to tell Nick from body parts, but Connie, well, that's another matter.

"It's just something about the way he moves and the build that says it's him. You know, like you can tell a person from behind just by the way they walk. Well that's the way it is on the tapes, you know it's him, couldn't be anyone else, but prove it in court, no way. Gracie, she's another matter. It's like she was born to the camera, smiles, waves, little faces, all the tricks they use on porno flicks to make it seem like you're having a ball." She smiled. "I set that up nicely, didn't I?"

"Wonderfully. Which five are Gracie's?" She handed them to me.

"I made dupes," she said. "Just in case."

"In case what?"

"A lightning bolt strikes or the ground opens and swallows you up, something like that. You know how it is with Nick."

On the way over to Hathor's apartment, we swung by Nick's office to drop off the keys. Sadie was still there.

"Find what you were looking for?"

"Most of it," I admitted.

"Which one sent you?"

"Actually, there were three. Let me ask you something: You ever read Stephen Crane, the guy who wrote *Red Badge of Courage*? Not his book, the poetry?"

She screwed up her face. "What kind of question is that?" Connie gave me a look, too, the eyeball-rolling kind that signaled I was off the deep end.

"Do something for me, will you? Write this down."

"You kidding?"

"No. How about it? Just a few lines." I took out my pen and notebook and handed it to her. "Sit down, make yourself comfortable," I said, then started a slow recitation of a poem that had always fascinated me.

"In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it."

She started writing, but at the last phrase, stopped and looked at me. "What kind of poem is that? It's sick."

"Is it? Isn't that how it was with you and Nick?" I picked up what she had written and handed it to Connie. "You, here, taking

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care of all his business, him romping around with almost any passing skirt. All, except you. Wasn't that a lot like being in the desert, eating your heart out?"

"It's a job. He had his life. I had mine. What's the deal?"

"Way I figure it, he was your man. In this office, nobody could take care of him the way you could. But you wanted more, wanted to take him home at night, give him what other women couldn't."

"I get what I need." Defiant but not a denial.

"Sure, but not what I'm talking about. You loving him, him ignoring you as a woman, that felt almost as *good* as his taking you home, mentally you could whip both of you, imagine what he was missing, will pain on him, yet never, ever let on what you were thinking. That how it went?"

"He treated me like shit," she said.

"And you loved it. You loved him. And, you hated him."

"No way I loved him," she said, but her eyes, the mirror to the soul, took on a glaze that belied the words. "No way."

"Sadie," I said gently, "this is Gabe. I know. You don't have to put me on. I know. Why I read the poem. Why I had you write it, so you could get a feel for the words, not just hear them, but feel what they mean."

"He was such a shit," she said, "but I knew in the end he would realize all the rest were nothing." The tears were streaming now. Emotion had broken the resolve she'd held for so long. "That's why I went out with the others. I'd tell him all about them. He'd laugh, but I knew I was hurting him."

"I know," I said. Then I put Dusty Starr's letter on the desk next to her scribbling. Confusion helped dam the trickle of tears for an instant. "Read it," I said.

"Desirée's husband? He did it?" she asked after finishing the letter.

"Don't think so," I said. "Jamison over at Homicide gave me a Xerox of a fragment of the bomb's envelope. You could still read some of the address. Not much, but enough. I talked with Desirée; she gave me some of Dusty's writing. Completely different. So is yours."

"How do you know the Dusty letter isn't disguised?" Connie asked.

"I don't. But an expert could tell. Me, I just rely on the eyeball and gut feel. You want to know how the poem ends?"

"Wasn't that the end?" Sadie asked.

I shook my head and recited:

"I said, 'Is it good, friend?'
'It is bitter—bitter,' he answered;
'But I like it
Because it is bitter,
And because it is my heart.'"

"That's how I knew it wasn't you. You do Nick, and it's the end of

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your pleasure. No more heart-eating—yours or his."

The doorman-butler-manservant-attendant—or whatever the politically correct term is for someone who schleps for a living—let us in, introducing himself as Michael. Sister Gracie's place, with its marble floor and postmodern décor, was sleek. The newly made maple and rosewood furniture had the glow of hundred-year-old Biedermeier. The art, filling walls rather than spots, tended toward abstract with an undercurrent of realism. Michael offered us a drink, which we refused; the décor and penthouse view were intoxicating enough.

"Been with Ms. Hathor long?" I asked.

"Since the beginning," he said, not indicating whether that was a year or eternity.

"TV business must be good," I said with the air of a conspirator.

"Yes, very, but not as good as the Internet," he replied in the spirit of sharing confidences.

I looked surprised. "Your idea?"

He guffawed, "Oh no, oh no. I'm not at all electronic. Sister Hathor's the one, she's a whiz on the computer."

"Am I?" Gracie said in her gentle TV voice. "Michael, you must be humble and allow me to be." Then turning her charm on us, she apologized for not making the greeting herself and invited us to sit. Michael silently left.

Gracie Hathor had removed her makeup and was wearing flame-red silk pajamas and robe. Even sans pancake, she was good-looking. I guess to be on TV you need the bone structure, all else is cosmetic. Her hair was tied in a ponytail. No pretense here, the all-American girl. I handed her the five tapes. "This what you wanted?"

"You got them?" The surprise seemed genuine. "How . . . ?"

"Friends in high places," I said.

Concern covered her classic face. "I said it was confidential, you didn't . . . ?"

She had a way of not finishing sentences, letting you fill in the blanks and answer whatever you imagined the question to be. I guess in the religion business, that's the way you get people to open up and reveal their souls. "Didn't what?"

The question seemed to fluster her. "Well, whatever. Talk about them, see them, anything that would breathe a word of their existence."

"Just to Connie, here, and she already knew."

"Classy flicks," Connie said.

"You watched them?"

"I tried holding one to my head and letting the images flow through, but it didn't work, so I asked Connie to screen them, make sure we hadn't swiped some old tapes of Boy Scouts around a campfire."

"No Boy Scouts on those tapes," Connie offered.

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"How much?" Gracie Hathor asked. The tone was not gentle, and I had the impression that she wanted rid of us.

"You said something about three times my fee." She reached over to a checkbook conveniently waiting on a nearby table. "Call it three thousand."

Without question, she wrote the check and handed it to me. I glanced at it and passed it to Connie.

"Thank you," Gracie Hathor said. "Michael will let you out."

I took the check from Connie, printed VOID across the signature, and held it up for Sister Hathor to see. "I lied about the three thousand. This case, my fee is candor, as if you'd sworn three oaths on a Bible."

"I paid you, what you do with the check is your business. Besides, I don't lie."

"You may be interested to know that Connie made dupes, sort of blackmail."

The look she gave Connie would have turned Lot's wife to salt. "What is it you want?"

"When did you find out about the other women?"

She closed her eyes and seemed to stop breathing. Were it not for the slight twitch in her jaw, I could have mistaken her for alabaster—cold, beautiful, never changing, corroded only by the elements, and then only if exposed.

For those of metaphysical bent, meditation is a balm to the soul. So often we castigate those of faith by railing at their lack of logic, when of course the logic we expect of them is our logic, the logic of science, the logic of proofs, the logic of Thomas fingering Jesus' wound. We ascribe the conclusions they draw from faith to irrational emotion when, in fact, faith requires little or no emotion. So as Gracie Hathor sat there with her eyes closed, barely moving, I knew she was not contemplating the rational, but searching her reservoir of faith for a response that would send me on my way. Without opening her eyes, she said, "I watched the tapes. Not these, other tapes. Ones that I found."

"Careless of him, don't you think?" Connie asked.

She shook her head. "He left them where they were easy for me to find."

"Why do you think he did that?" I asked.

The eyes opened now. For the first time I felt some emotion from the priestess, as if she had become human. "He knew I loved him."

"You had faith in him, and he betrayed you? Something like that?"

"He never betrayed me. It was who he was; I should have known, but I was too arrogant. There were signs, even when I first met him, but the power of his faith in himself was so strong that I ignored what I knew and just gave myself to him." There was a calmness about her. None of the preacher lady, no fire, no brimstone, no ecstasy, no hallelujah, just quiet talk, as if I were her

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confessor. "I guess I thought if he loved me as much as I loved him, I could change him." Her head lifted and the preacher jaw thrust itself forward. "I'm good at that, changing people. I can make them see the light, make them believe in things they can never feel, or smell, or taste, or see. Most of the time I do it with words, but with Nick, words were useless, he'd heard them all and laughed them away. I knew that if I were to change him, I would need to give myself to him fully and completely, to trust in my faith." She shook her head. "I know. It sounds silly, even to me, but that's the way it was. There were signs it was working, and in the end, I thought he was mine, I thought I had him, I thought he loved me as much as I loved him."

"But he didn't."

"No. He didn't. He was going to use the tapes. Some scheme he had on the Internet. Awful."

"So you sent him a valentine."

Puzzlement played across those pretty features. She could have been playing at confusion but wasn't. I somehow had the feeling she wanted the tapes not to hide them but to remind her of her arrogance in believing she could truly change a devil like Nick. "How did you know?"

I handed her the check, along with the letter signed "Dusty." "Homicide has a matching fragment of the envelope."

The sadness seemed to press her shoulders with the accumulated weight of mankind's sins. Her voice when she spoke was from Plato's cave, blind of sentiment, touching despair. "It was the only way I knew to bring him down. I tried to warn him off with the letter. I found out about Desirée, and thought the threat would make him reconsider. I was wrong. Nothing stopped Nick. Guilt, ridicule, humiliation, rejection rolled off him like modesty at an orgy. He was funny that way; nothing seemed to get to him, as if he had no conscience. The bomb was the only way, something distant. Had I tried to stab him in the heart, I would have found myself in his arms before the blade could bite. Poison would have been his vitamin. No, the only way it could be done was at a distance. Suddenly. Like a thunderbolt, disguised as a love offering.

"To him, love was cheap, the last thing he would have taken seriously, thus the best way to lull him." There seemed to be a tear in her eye, but it could have been the angle of the light. "I'm glad he's dead," she said with finality. But then, in a softer voice, "I'll miss him, though, and I have a premonition that without him, life will lose meaning. For all the pleasure he gave, he was evil, but the pleasure, oh, the pleasure. It was sublime, and I will miss it and therefore him." Out of the depths of that cave she looked me full in the face, innocent as God's lamb. "Why," she asked, "couldn't you leave things alone? Why did you have to do this to me?"

It was a good question. One that I'd considered but not really articulated. Charity had been immersed in material love. Desirée

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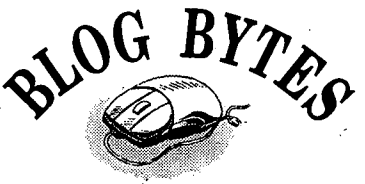
was a romantic. While Sadie's love was twisted, it was, nonetheless, there. Now, sitting talking to a fallen angel whose passion was driven by faith, I realized I'd have rather it was one of the others who had taken Nick down. Yet, given Nick, none of them could have. Just as certainly, someone needed to sort out the affair for posterity. Someone like me. "It's what I do," I said. "Call it a labor of love. Call it God's work, but in the end, it's what I do. If I didn't set things straight, it would be anything goes, chaos. Without me and the others—Jewish mothers, Dutch uncles, grade-school teachers—we'd never know right from wrong and all wind up in hell."

She seemed to understand, though in these things you can never be sure. Then, as if seeking either justification or absolution, she asked, "Was I wrong? To do what I did?"

Knowing Nick the way I did, it was a devil of a question to answer.



by Bill Crider

Ed Gorman has handed off this column to me, and I plan to continue Ed's practice of presenting a wide variety of blogs for all types of readers. I'll try to mention some prominent ones and to find some obscure ones you might not notice if not for me.

And speaking of prominent blogs, the first I'd like to recommend is Ed's own: http://newimprovedgorman.blogspot.com/. Like a lot of blogs, Ed's is pretty much free-form. Recently he's reviewed novels as varied as David Goodis's *The Wounded and the Slain* and *Saturday Games* by Brown Meggs. He's had an interview with author Charles Runyon, the rumors of whose death proved to be greatly exaggerated. He's presented a list of ten crime novels that he believes should be read and re-read. No matter what he's writing about, Ed is trenchant, informed, and informative. If you're not reading his blog, you're missing one of the real pleasures of the Internet.

Ed has previously recommended Steve Lewis's Mystery*File blog in this space. It's another blog that's high on my list of pleasures, and it's changed URLs since Ed's earlier mention. It's now found here: http://mysteryfile.com/blog/. Steve continues to have some of the best-researched articles on mystery you'll find anywhere, along with movie reviews, book reviews, guest columns, letters from his readers, and great photos of book covers, lobby cards, and movie posters. Recent reviews include one of the movie *Meet Boston Blackie*, R. Austin Freeman's *The Jacob Street Mystery,* and Richard Burke's *The Frightened Pigeon.* There's also a letter from Doug Swanson that explains why he is no longer writing the Flippo series. Mystery*File is essential reading for fans of the mystery **(continued on p. 90)**

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GIRL'S BEST FRIEND

by Judith Cutler

When a guy presents you with an engagement ring, a socking great oval ruby surrounded by diamonds, it might seem a tad ungrateful to subject it to scrutiny with a jeweller's eyepiece.

Griff, my adoptive grandfather, business partner, and antique-dealer extraordinaire, wouldn't ever soil his lips with expressions like *looking a gift-horse in the mouth.* But he did ask, as he prepared supper that evening, "Surely that breaches all rules of etiquette, my darling Lina?"

I slipped the ornate jewel back onto my ring finger, which I wiggled so that it picked up the candlelight. Griff always made meals an occasion, even worrying about the niceties of what cutlery to use when serving Thai stir-fry in an Elizabethan cottage at the heart of a Kentish village. "I think I was a bit bowled over," I conceded slowly. "All that bended-knee stuff and the promise of a round-the-world cruise for our honeymoon. For me, Lina Townend!"

"And there I thought chivalry had died out in your generation," he said.

"Apparently not," I said coolly. But how could I snub my dearest friend? "Griff, what was I doing? This is Piers Hamlyn, for goodness' sake!"

"Piers Hamlyn, who, despite his predilection for cords and bodywarmers, is a most dashing piece of manhood," Griff burbled. "Those shoulders! That neat bum!"

"Those cornflower-blue eyes, perfect complexion, and honey-coloured hair," I added.

"And second cousin once removed of your own father, Lord

Once a teacher of creative writing, Judith Cutler has become the celebrated author of several popular mystery series, including the Kate Power police procedurals, and the Caffy Tyler decorator-sleuth books. The antiques dealers featured in her new story for *EQMM* also star in her novel *Drawing the Line*, which Allison & Busby released in 2005. She is married to another of this issue's authors, Edward Marston.

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Elham," Griff reflected, with distinctly less enthusiasm.

"Which doesn't say much for him, does it?" I asked quietly.

"Just because Lord Elham—how strange that neither of us ever refers to him as anything more intimate—is not the purest diamond in the tiara doesn't mean his cousin is flawed. Though I must admit," he continued, allowing a tiny quaver to creep into his voice, and sinking into his frail-old-man mode, "it has been what we used to call a whirlwind romance."

It had. And considering that women of my generation tended not to demand courtship and rings and weddings before—as Griff gracelessly put it—hopping into bed, it was a very romantic romance. Flowers; candlelit dinners; the question popped within two weeks of our first meeting at a big and classy antiques fair at a vast country pile—it belonged to another of his cousins—and no attempt to go beyond a not terribly passionate snog.

What on earth had I been doing? The ring said, in a very snide voice, "Doing pretty well for yourself, considering."

I whipped it off and peered closely at it again.

"Oh, Griff, why didn't I tell Piers to ask you for my hand? You could have asked him about his prospects and how he meant to maintain me!" Which would have given me time to think.

"I take it you wouldn't want me to go so far as to reject him as a suitor?"

"Yes. No. I wish I knew." I gave the ring another squint. What was wrong with me? Or rather, what was wrong with it? What had got all my divvy's antennae a-twitch?

Its provenance, for one thing. Every dealer likes to know where an item's been before it comes to him. You might think it's enough to know the maker, but forging manufacturer's marks is easy-peasy to a master, as is copying a painter's signature on a faked masterpiece. So you want to know who bought it and from whom, all through its life. In the case of a picture, the number of times it's been exhibited and where. As for a ring like this, it's tricky and hardly worth bothering, so long as you can see the hallmark on the band, in this case one declaring it was made in Birmingham, that City of a Thousand Trades, way back in 1879. So it was the right age to have a silver mount for the stones, as opposed to the stronger platinum claws used later.

Everything was right about it.

Or not.

"I'd love you to take a look at it," I said. "After all, it's not exactly my area, is it?"

"At our level, dear heart, we have to be Jacks and Jills of all trades. I know you can beat most people hollow when it comes to Victorian china, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't turn your hand to other things. I know, I know. You were spot-on with the date—but then," he added, "I'd have been disappointed if you hadn't

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been. You worked hard to learn the assay marks." He smiled, and tucked a lock of my hair in place. "There's a good brain between those ears of yours, my child. For all you worry about having no paper qualifications, you're a very bright young woman."

I didn't argue. But school and I had been relative strangers to each other, thanks to my life in care after my mother's death. You'd have expected my father to take me in, maybe. But not my father, Lord Elham, of Bossingham Court. Lord Elham, old rogue that he was, had taken no more notice of me than he'd taken of my other thirty siblings. But then, he claimed he'd never known about any of us, not in any detail. And indeed, it was me who'd found him, not the other way round. ("*I* who'd found him, dear heart," Griff would have told me gently.) And he hadn't been especially keen on me, at least not until I'd dug him out of a particularly nasty hole and managed to cast him in the light not of a greedy criminal but of a public benefactor. My father called himself a gentleman—but since I'd always believed in the adage *gentleman is as gentleman does,* I'd yet to see him deserve the term. Or the title Noble Lord. Lord Elham. And no, that didn't make me Lady anything, since I was born on what Griff would call the wrong side of the blanket. Well, with all those brothers and sisters in the picture, you'd probably worked that out for yourself. He'd taken the huff when I'd refused to leave Griff and go and live at Bossingham Hall, but that's another story.

"Now, do I look at this bauble as if admiring your betrothed's taste, or as if valuing it for auction?"

"As my dearest friend," I said humbly. "And under a very strong lamp."

"Tomorrow morning, then."

Before I washed up I hung the ring on a little Edwardian ring-tree that for as long as I could remember Griff had kept beside the kettle. That was Griff for you. Forward planning. Or, more likely, seeing a charming little item going cheap and giving it a good home. Most of the stuff we bought we had to sell, of course—that's how dealers make a living. But Griff made it a rule that we only bought what we ourselves liked. Usually.

"If you like something, you find out about it," he'd told me when he'd first employed me. "And the more you know about something the more people regard you as an expert and come to trust you. Trust is like virtue—it's its own reward."

"And it doesn't damage your prices."

He'd chuckled. "Clearly, dear heart, you are a dealer in the bud."

Over the next two or three years, I'd blossomed a bit. What I was best at was restoring damaged Victorian china, and *not* passing it as perfect. Unlike some I could name. So people trusted me when I said something was good, you see. And my prices rose accordingly. Occasionally other dealers would come to me when they found

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something hard to shift. If it was pukka, and only then, I'd pop it on our stall and sell it at the usual commission. Not that I would be selling Piers's ring on my stall, for goodness' sake!

"What worries me," Griff said as he wiped up, "is that despite his lineage Piers works at the lowest end of the market. Collectibles, indeed! Junk, in other words."

"There's room for all sorts—and we're not exactly at the top end ourselves."

I wished the words back: What Griff was really afraid of was that I'd abandon him.

If only I could have talked Piers over with a woman. But I hadn't many women friends my own age, thanks to my miserable upbringing, and Griff, though he was dearer to me than anyone seemed able to imagine, was hardly a role model for someone as young and romantic as me (or should that be *I*?): He'd been in a settled if semidetached relationship for more years than he cared to remember.

Washing-up done, I dried my hands and slapped on some cream. As beauty routines went, it didn't go far, and Griff tended to nag when I didn't use sunblock or moisturiser. I had to admit that the ring looked better on well-tended mitts than it would have done on my pre-Griff paws. Or did it look too good? Despite Griff's offer, I took it and the eyeglass up to my workroom and switched on the strong spotlight I need for the most delicate restoration work. And then I called Griff.

"You've got better eyes than I have," he said, somewhat grudgingly since I'd hauled him from his favourite television program, a docudrama about civilians being tested to SAS standards. "But you're right. Those two stones aren't exactly the same as the others. Pretty close. But a ring that age is bound to have been repaired."

"Cleaned and repaired?"

"Why not? The young man wants to impress his beloved."

"Piers didn't say anything about a repair. He said it came straight from a sale—he'd only cleaned it up a bit to see what he'd got."

"He's cleaned it very well indeed. To professional standards," Griff mused. "So why didn't he come clean—as clean as this ring, in fact—and simply tell you it had come with two stones missing and he'd had them replaced?"

"Why indeed?"

Next time we met, this time in a church hall in the Cotswolds so cold that Griff's knuckles turned bluey-white, the rest of his fingers purple, Piers presented me with another ring.

"I'm not asking you to choose between them," he said pettishly as I slipped it admiringly onto my right hand: It was a sapphire

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version of my ruby, with a lovely Sri Lankan stone, much lighter than you get these days, that put it back into the Victorian period.

I bit my lip: I'd better not tell him I preferred it.

"I'm asking you to sell it. It's too good for my stall: It'll just disappear amongst all the collectibles. But you've got nice, classy stuff. Everything guaranteed antique, with nothing less than a hundred years old."

I nodded. We were totally out of place at this fair, as Griff bitterly acknowledged, to which we'd only come because Griff had a Thespian friend in the area and because I could meet up with Piers.

"China, glass, and treen," I said. "No jewellery."

"Then it'll stand out all the better, especially with a spotlight trained on it. And your hand to model it." He kissed it with enough passion to tempt me.

"I'll have to ask Griff," I said.

"He lets you fly solo with your restored china," he pointed out. "I can't see how he could object if you want to branch out into jewellery, particularly stuff as nice as this."

"I'll ask," I said coldly, "because I value his opinion." He should have known by now never to argue about anything concerning Griff.

"Do I recollect that you come of age shortly, my child?"

"You know I do. And we agreed to have no fuss." Largely because Griff was increasingly terrified by his own birthdays, and in any case celebrating being twenty-one was a bit old-fashioned these days.

"It occurs to me that you are so attracted to that sapphire ring that it would make an ideal gift."

I looked him in the eye. "Not so much attracted as suspicious, Griff. You look." I passed the lovely thing to him.

"The sapphire's exquisite," he sighed. Then he stopped. "How many dodgy stones do you make it?"

"Three this time. I shall have to mark it sold as seen."

"And the price? If you do that it'll never reach what he's asking. And I have an idea you were relying on the commission to buy your wedding dress."

"Wedding, shmedding." I took the ruby ring off as well. The two big stones blinked enticingly at me. The diamonds surrounding them didn't.

"Shame," Piers greeted my confession that we'd not been able to sell the ring. "But why don't you keep trying? And I was hoping you'd shift these earrings for me." He produced an elaborate case, fine leather and watered silk, containing a dazzling pair with free-hanging emeralds and diamonds on tiny springs.

"Victorian again." They were so fine I'd have expected to see them at Christie's.

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"Got this aunt who's fallen on hard times. Doesn't want anyone to know." He tapped the side of his nose. "Noblesse oblige, and all that."

My eyes widened at the price he wanted. "That's well above our usual range—but still not enough for such a lovely set." I braced myself. "Are you sure these aren't off the back of some lorry, Piers?"

"From the collection of Lady Olivia Spedding." He looked coldly down at me, rather like the Duke of Wellington, now I came to think of it, holding out his hand for the earrings.

I returned them, shrugging. "No skin off my nose," I informed him, my voice at its most common, all accent and attitude.

I wasn't so much surprised as taken aback when, as we packed up at the end of a not especially profitable day, Piers sidled up, dropping the familiar jeweller's box on our stall. "Usual commission," he said, and disappeared.

It was Griff who got first look at them with the eyeglass this time. "Continental," he said. "And all good stones."

"You mean—?"

"What do you think?"

I peered. "Beautifully clean. Everything hunky-dory for the period. Feel the weight—they wouldn't half stretch the old ear-lobes. Lovely quality stones—all of them. I'd be honoured to sell these."

I thought I heard Griff mutter something about sprats catching mackerel, but perhaps I was mistaken.

A couple of weeks later I handed over the cash for the earrings in the traditional brown envelope. It was hardly out of my hand when another slightly battered jewel case appeared, purple leather outside, purple silk in, showing off a diamond pendant and matching earrings to perfection. Victorian, again, and perhaps a bit fussy for modern tastes.

It was all so low-key we might have been business partners, not engaged to become life partners. Theoretically engaged. Anyone who could palm off a piece with stones I could feel in my bones were false was no longer my fiancé. I said nothing yet. Grassing someone up was something not to be done lightly. But in a trade that totally depended on trust, what else could I do?

Griff removed the eyepiece and rubbed his face. "And what four-letter word, first letter S, last letter M, springs to your suspicious mind?"

"Scam," I said flatly.

"A profitable one, too. You buy a couple of these so-called man-made diamonds for a song, remove two decent-sized but not particularly noticeable stones from pieces where no one will immediately notice the exchange, replace them with the fakes, and pocket the difference. If you got brave enough to replace a one-carat diamond, say, with a fake one, you could profit by four or five thousand pounds."

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I nodded. "To get away with it, you really need someone totally reliable like us. If by any chance people found they'd bought a wrong 'un they'd hotfoot it back to us and complain. And we could only say we'd had them from someone else and terribly sorry and here's your money back."

"And you complain to Piers, who laughs in your face. Or says his great-aunt or whatever must have replaced them to raise cash for her gambling habit. Or his aunt's dead, and he reminds us it's *caveat emptor.*"

There weren't many Latin phrases I knew but that was one of them. "To my mind it's more a case of *caveat*ing Trading Standards or even the police."

"Oh, dear one, you can't use *caveat* like that," he sighed. "But you're right about the legal implications. To my mind, the only question is how much Piers knows about it."

"If his genes are anything like Lord Elham's, a lot. But we need proof: You and I know there's something wrong, but neither of us could stand up in a court of law and say what these stones actually are. And surely, Griff, in that thick Filofax of yours, you've got the number of a—whatsit—a jewel expert."

"Gemologist, angel heart. Yes, I'm sure I have. One, moreover, I can trust implicitly. Now, that chicken should be cooked to perfection."

Over supper we debated long and loud what we should do next. My initial impulse was to pack up the pendant and earrings and send them straight back to Piers. With both gorgeous rings. But if we did, he'd certainly try to palm them off on someone else less canny than us.

"Equally, of course, Piers might be an innocent dupe of someone to whom he'd innocently taken old items to be cleaned," Griff observed resignedly. "And it's the cleaner who's at fault."

I pulled a face. But it was of course true. "So how do we find out—any of this?"

I might have known who would do the dirty work. Yours truly, of course. Well, not for anything would I have put Griff at risk. His arthritis was better since he'd cut down the drink and was downing measures of an evil-looking liquid prescribed by an alternative therapist, but he tended more and more these days to let me go to sales while he stayed at home and ran the shop. That way he had more energy to go to the very taxing antiques fairs we set up our stall at. So there was no argument. Especially as I didn't tell him what I was planning.

He and Lord Elham had disliked each other at sight. Lord Elham loathed Griff's campiness, Griff Lord Elham's dishonesty. At bottom, I suspect Lord Elham wanted to wrest me from Griff's care, for no better reason than that he needed a skivvy. Griff wanted to keep me with him because he loved me. There was no

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point in forcing them into each other's company: I'd sussed out that getting to know each other would only make matters worse. The main reason why I'd spend occasional days at Bossingham Hall was because Lord Elham had rooms full of the most amazing junk, some of it extremely saleable. Since his favourite tipple—indeed, his only tipple—was Champagne, my skill in sorting out items I could sell for him was called for quite often. This time, on the principle of setting a thief to catch a thief, I popped round at a time when daytime TV was at its nadir, taking with me a couple of homemade casseroles he could warm up in his new microwave. He looked worse than ever: Though he was ten years younger than Griff, his complexion was purply-grey and very dry looking. At least since I'd come on the scene his hair looked better: He'd seen some terribly expensive product in a TV advert and I now bought some whenever I shopped for his Champagne. If only I could get him to exercise something other than his zapper thumb and drinking elbow.

"Piers Hamlyn!" he exploded. "Going to marry Piers Hamlyn! And why didn't the young bastard seek my permission?"

I ignored the term "bastard," quite restrained of me in the circumstances. "I don't think young men do, these days." It was one thing wishing I'd asked Griff to vet my choice, quite another letting Lord Elham in on the act. "In any case, I said I was engaged to him, not that I was going to marry him." I explained about the dodgy diamonds.

He slammed his fist on the Sheraton occasional table beside his chair. I winced. "Any young man who puts fake diamonds on my daughter's hand will not marry her."

All that Champagne was making him a bit slow. Or it might have been his diet, mostly Pot Noodles, with the odd frozen ready-meal thrown in.

"He doesn't know I know they're fake," I said, taxing his limited abilities.

"If you say they are, they are," he declared loyally, topping up my 1860 cut-crystal flute.

"I need to prove it. And I want to know if it's his scam, or if he's a victim, like me. He's brought a few things for me to sell—from the collection of Lady Olivia Spedding, he says."

"Olivia Spedding! Good God! I didn't know she was still alive."

"Fallen on hard times; having to sell bits and pieces. Would she have had a few stones replaced here and there?"

"More likely to have the whole lot exchanged for paste," he mused. "You sure she's still alive?"

"He ought to know: He's her nephew. Great-nephew."

"Is he indeed? That must mean I'm related to her. Are you sure?" He peered at me, then, more hopefully, at the bottom of his glass.

"It's what he says. Anyway, what shall I do?"

A familiar expression of piggy greed settled on his puffy fea-

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tures. "Sell that sauceboat for me and I'll make a few enquiries."

It may have looked like a sauceboat, but it was in fact an eighteenth-century ladies' urinal—a vessel for ladies to wee into during long sermons or ceremonies. But that made it more, rather than less, valuable. I hoped that the women in the family had more sense of hygiene than my parent, or I couldn't have sworn that anyone had washed it before it had come to its present use.

Even with my ten-percent commission, I was able to return a week or so later with four cases of Champagne.

"That Piers Hamlyn chappie still sniffing after you?" he greeted me, though his eyes were on the cardboard boxes in the back of our van.

"He's in Ireland," I said. "Doing a few sales." Which was unlikely, come to think of it, given his stock in trade, which last time I saw him included a couple of Ty Beanie Bears. If he'd taken me, with my divvy skills, I'd have made us a mint. But for some reason he'd never suggested it, and I was too sure I didn't want to marry him to ask. And then I cursed myself for being so damned moral—maybe Ireland was where he got his dodgy gems.

Lord Elham sniffed. "Not good enough for you, my girl. Not good enough."

Not good enough for the illegitimate daughter of a drunken old lecher like him? Griff referred to him fastidiously as a reprobate, which sounded nicely eighteenth-century.

"The man's a fraud. At least that tosh about Olivia Spedding is. Popped her clogs years ago: no stamina, those Speddings. So wherever he's getting it from it's not Olivia. In any case, she spent all her dosh on the gee-gees: never wore a diamond in her life. You sure you got the name right?"

I didn't see how I could have misheard a name like that, but until I got all that booze into his domain and a glass of it in his hand, I'd get no more sense out of him.

When he was settled at last, I asked, "Has Piers any other relations who might have asked him to sell the jewellery?"

"That was the respectable branch of the family. Have you met Hamlyn's family yet?"

I shook my head. I had an idea it was because he was afraid I wouldn't pass muster, and would start dropping aitches and eating my peas with a knife. Or was it only the middle classes like Griff who worried about such niceties?

"Or his friends?"

Another shake of the head.

"Are you sure he's kosher?"

I looked him straight in the eye. "That's what I'm hoping you'd tell me."

He took the sort of pull on his Champagne that I can only man-

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age on water, and then it gives me hiccups. "Tell you what, you sell those plates for me and get me some more bubbly, and I'll see what I can do."

I nodded. I knew of old that the plates were a pretty tatty collection, mostly more Piers's sort of price range than mine, but for the information he might come up with I'd buy him a case of fizz myself.

In the event, I didn't have to. I found a red anchor mark Chelsea plate at the bottom.

"Ireland!" Griff repeated, when I reported back our conversation as word for word as I could make it. "Why didn't you tell me the little rat had gone to Ireland?"

"Because I know you don't like me talking about him, and I thought you'd think I was upset not to be invited."

He frowned as he worked out what I meant. That was the trouble with not finding words easy: Sometimes they shuffled themselves into clumsy lumps. "And you weren't upset?"

"Glad not to be. I wouldn't want to sleep with him under false pretences."

"God knows where you got your moral principles from—not Lord Elham."

"Mostly from you!"

I could see he was pleased. But he added, quite seriously, "On the other hand, think of the stuff you could have picked up over there. Anyway, Ireland. And Dublin in particular. Diamond merchant."

"Not Amsterdam? Or Hatton Garden?"

"We're not talking about real diamonds, are we, petal? Not according to my contact." He touched his nose.

"They are fakes?"

"As true as a six-pound note. As we always suspected."

"But that doesn't get us any further forward with Piers. For my own satisfaction, Griff, I need to know if he's running the show or if he's a dupe. I may suspect . . . but I need to know."

"For that, my love, unless you wish to involve the police, you may have to rely on Lord Elham."

"Set a thief to catch a thief, you mean."

"Not in your trade vehicle!" Lord Elham insisted.

"I'm not going to turn up advertising it's me, am I? We'll do what Griff and I always do if we want to go to London. We catch the train, and after that take a cab. There's nothing more incognito than a cab, surely."

"And you're happy to lurk outside the establishment—in that cab, for preference—while I Do the Deed?"

I wasn't, but I didn't see my getting admitted into what called itself a massage parlour but sounded more like a high-class brothel, except as an employee. And I'd always drawn the line at

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that, even when I was at my lowest, before Griff came to my rescue.

So when the day came, and Lord Elham had had the nod and the wink he'd hoped for, I collected him in my Fiesta and drove us to Ashford International Station.

"Travel first class? Dear me, I can't afford that!" was his reaction to my offer, but I could tell he was sacrificing himself. However, he perked up considerably when he saw even the second-class areas were comfortable and our seats even had a little table on which to place our Champagne, which I was determined to ration. To my amazement, he showed me how to tackle Sudoku, rattling through the *Times*'s fiendish puzzle as if he were a child with an abacus. The journey passed surprisingly quickly.

"Now," I prompted him, "you remember how that little tape recorder works? And you won't have more than one bottle?"

"Shampoo at six hundred pounds a pop? You jest!"

All three faces were serious as we sat around Griff's dining table. He'd made a huge effort, not to impress Lord Elham, but to show me how generous-spirited he was, entertaining a man he still saw as his rival under his own roof. To be honest, the delicate soup, tender guinea fowl, and exploding meringues were wasted on my father. But he too was on his best behaviour, praising as judiciously as if we didn't know that Spicy Beef Pot Noodles were his real preference, and gossiping about the famous faces he'd seen at the brothel. I'd spotted, from the depths of my cab, a further couple he'd missed. One face we'd both seen was Piers Hamlyn's.

At last Lord Elham extended a spatulate finger and pressed the Play button. We could hear Piers's voice quite clearly, against the chink of glasses and the raucous voices of the rich. He was boasting about his fence, how it was like taking candy from a baby.

And then we heard Lord Elham's voice: "Young man, it happens to be my baby from whom you are taking the confectionary. My little girl Lina. She will not be marrying you, of course. And, unless you want an exposé that would shock even your family to the roots, I suggest you listen very carefully to what I say . . . "

"The Falklands!"

"I do wish, my love, you wouldn't squeak," Lord Elham reproached me, just as if he were Griff. "Yes, the Falklands. I believe he will find his niche out there: sheep or mineral rights, whichever interests him more. Not forever. Just long enough for you to mop up all the fake gems he's scattered about the country." He laid a wad of notes on the table. "That should suffice. You will keep any change." He looked at my ringless finger. "You should find enough there to purchase genuine stones for the two rings in your keeping." He sat back, belched, and looked as his watch. "Now, I always watch *Big Brother* at this time. And then, my child, you can run me home."

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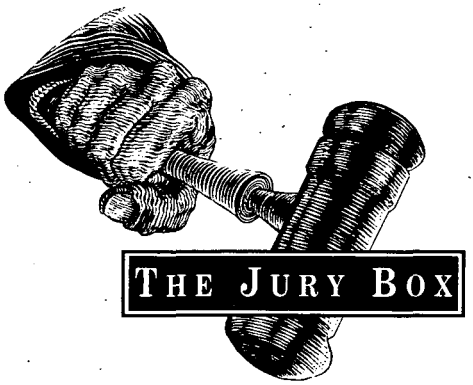

by Jon L. Breen

Maps have often added an extra touch of distinction to crime novels, once associated with classical puzzles (floor plan of the murder house with X marking the spot the body was found), today more likely to turn up on historical mysteries. The first three very dissimilar books reviewed below have in common both their excellence and their use of maps, two with classy endpaper illustrations, the third a back cover in the style of the 1940s Dell Mapbacks.

**** C.J. Sansom: *Sovereign,* Viking, $25.95. In 1541, King Henry VIII is heading northward from London to the recently rebellious York, where hunchback lawyer Matthew Shardlake, hero of the author's two previous novels, has been sent ahead to review petitions to the king and to oversee the care of an imprisoned conspirator. This model historical detective novel offers period details with the ring of truth, a complicated but comprehensibly presented political and social context, painfully believable interpersonal conflicts, and enough plot and incident to justify its near-600-page length. One minor complaint: occasional anachronisms in the dialogue, most jarringly the modern term propaganda.

**** Deborah Crombie: *Water Like a Stone,* Morrow, $24.95. Scotland Yard's Duncan Kincaid and his fellow cop, now life partner, Gemma James, travel with their children to Cheshire for Christmas with Kincaid's family, encountering both domestic crises and the discovery of a mummified infant on a building project. Deft plotting, a large cast of well-drawn characters, and a good background of the narrowboats that travel the local canals mark the usual fine job from one of the most consistently excellent writers on the current scene.

**** Richard A. Lupoff: *Marblehead: A Novel of H.P. Lovecraft,* Ramble House, $38 hardcover, $25 trade paper. In 1927, the plot confronting New England's horror master includes the Ku Klux Klan, German agents, Houdini's surviving brother, Lindbergh's flight, the Sacco-Vanzetti case, Hitler's *Mein Kampf,* and

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various U.S. and European political issues. Lupoff manages to make a man as odd and as full of repellent opinions as Lovecraft a sympathetic protagonist. Some may find the period and biographical detail overwhelming, with no meal or monthly issue of *Weird Tales* left undescribed, but those fascinated by pulp writers and their times will find this novel even more enthralling (and certainly more historically accurate) than Paul Malmont's *The Chinatown Death Cloud Peril.* (According to Fender Tucker's introduction, Lupoff's 1985 novel *Lovecraft's Book,* a shorter version of the same story, was a from-scratch rewrite of this book, which was written in the 1970s but not published until now.)

**** Steve Hockensmith: *On the Wrong Track,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. In a second book-length appearance even better than their Edgar-nominated first, illiterate would-be Sherlock Holmes Gustav ("Old Red") Amlingmeyer and his lettered older brother Otto ("Big Red") bend their cowboy principles to take a job with the Southern Pacific railroad in 1890s California. This seriocomic variation on the lively subgenre of passenger train mysteries enthralls from start to finish and is fairly enough clued to satisfy traditionalists.

**** Arthur Phillips: *Angelica,* Random House, $25.95. Written with a delicacy and elaboration appropriate to its Victorian period, this masterfully constructed puzzle-box novel may be ghost story, sexually charged psychological study, examination of gender differences and expectations, paranormal detective story, or some combination of the above. The same events in a troubled London household are seen from four viewpoints: a haunted and constrained young mother, her scientist husband, their precocious and mercurial four-year-old daughter, and a female spiritualist. As complex in theme as in structure, this is a novel of remarkable originality and literary adventurousness.

*** Ed Gorman: *Fools Rush In,* Pegasus, $24. In June 1963, a black college student romantically involved with the daughter of a U.S. senator is one of two young men found murdered in Black River Falls, Iowa. In the course of lawyer and private eye Sam McCain's welcome return to action after a three-year absence, the lives of some series regulars take unexpected turns, though in at least one case the turn may be inevitable. Richness of characterization and nostalgic but unsentimental evocation of time and place make this whole series a unique and irresistible slice of dark-hued Americana.

*** Vin Packer: *Scott Free,* Carroll & Graf, $24.95. For the first time in 38 years, Marijane Meaker (best-known as young adult writer M.E. Kerr) revives the byline under which she emerged as one of the best crime novelists of the 1950s. Scotti (formerly Scott) House, a pre-operative transsexual who sometimes assists in her former wife's insurance investigations,

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is a likeable new sleuth worth meeting again. The plot, involving the household of a dying millionaire whose young daughter is threatened with kidnapping for an unusual ransom, will keep you turning the pages, but the picture of a transgendered life carries at least as much interest.

*** Patrick Culhane: *Black Hats,* Morrow, $24.95. An aged Wyatt Earp, western legend turned Hollywood private eye, travels to 1920 New York to help Doc Holliday's speakeasy-proprietor son, one of the few purely fictional characters in the book. Culhane is the unconcealed pseudonym of Max Allan Collins, acknowledged expert at bringing historical personages to life, including this time Al Capone, William S. Hart, Bat Masterson, Arnold Rothstein, Damon Runyon, and Texas Guinan. The concluding bibliographic essay admirably separates fact from fiction.

*** Lee Child: *Bad Luck and Trouble,* Delacorte, $26. Numerically obsessed adventurer Jack Reacher gets a uniquely coded distress call from an old Army MP colleague and reunites what's left of his special investigative unit in Southern California to avenge the dropping-from-helicopter murder of one of their number. This is by far the least impressive Child novel I've read, but I'll still recommend it to just about everybody for its combination of fair-play puzzle-spinning and thriller derring-do. Is an early example of Reacher's detective skill that comes perilously close to clairvoyance a subtle clue to the solution? Read it and see.

** Lee Goldberg: *The Last Word,* Signet, $6.99. In the eighth and final novel based on the Dick Van Dyke TV series *Diagnosis: Murder,* Dr. Mark Sloan looks into a case of murder by organ transplant that threatens members of his sleuthing team. A promising medical whodunit degenerates into over-the-top conspiracy thriller with soap opera seasoning. A spoiler warning alerts readers that endings of earlier novels in the series are given away. You might want to seek those out—given Goldberg's skill as writer and plotter, they're probably pretty good—and skip this one unless you're an obsessive fan of the TV show.

Blog Bytes (continued from p. 76) and popular culture in general.

Duane Swierczynski, besides having a name that's really hard for me to spell, is a crime writer of note *(The Blonde* being his latest novel), the editor-in-chief of the *Philadelphia City Paper,* an editor (of *Damn Near Dead,* an excellent anthology that includes an Edgar-nominated short story by, well, me), and a blogger (http://secretdead.blogspot.com/) who can be both vulgar and hilarious (see his posts on Allan Guthrie week), personal (posts on the birthdays of his wife and child), and serious (interviews with Ed Holub and Lance Doty, who are, respectively, trying to bring novels by David Goodis and Fredric Brown to the screen). Duane doesn't post every single day, but he's always interesting, so I check often.

Bill Crider's own blog, Bill Crider's Pop Culture Magazine, can be found at http://billcrider.blogspot.com.

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

EVIDENCE

by Victoria Weisfeld

Victoria Weisfeld makes her living as a health-policy writer. Over the past two years she's also turned her hand seriously to fiction-writing, though she has always enjoyed telling stories. Like her main character, she's an avid and observant traveler, but she says she won't ever give up mysteries for travel writing; she does enough fact-centered writing at work. ¶

From the first day of the Mediterranean tour, Eugenia Clarke was on a collision course with the clique of gabbling teenage girls. No doubt she embodied all those characteristics of the mothers, teachers, and maiden aunts they had fled across the Atlantic to escape. She wore sensible shoes and inconspicuous clothing, studied her travel books and attended their guide's lectures, preferred museums and gardens to lying on the beach, and chose the local food, always carefully—in other words, she was anathema. A travel writer for several magazines and guidebooks, Eugenia had a well-developed repertoire of stratagems to maximize experience and minimize discomfort, which she willingly shared with her loyal readers, none of whom were under legal drinking age.

"We picked you for this assignment, Eugenia," Wally, her editor, had said, "because you're the one who can sort it all out."

She raised her eyebrows.

"The one who can tell our readers whether they really should be nervous going abroad in these times. Take the temperature. Test the limits. Go or no-go."

"Should I assume you want the answer to be 'go'?"

"Not at all. If it's 'no-go' to southern Europe, it will be 'go' someplace else. Give it to them straight, like you always do. They're depending on you. As am I."

Wally was a small man, with sharp eyes in an unwrinkled face, and when he leaned back in his well-worn brown leather chair, he

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looked like a boy visiting his father's office. She wondered whether his feet touched the floor. In the large window behind him were the peaks and valleys of midtown Manhattan. But the farthest Wally ever strayed from his fifty-square-block neighborhood was on his very infrequent trips to the Upper West Side to visit an ageing aunt. He traveled the world through the words of his authors, none of whom he trusted more completely than Eugenia Clarke.

"You said the Mediterranean?" she prompted.

"A standard tour. Not imaginative, but popular. Start in Greece, then west to Italy, Spain, Portugal. Some island-hopping. Use your judgment about excursions. What might average tourists do, and will it get them in hot water?"

"'Taking the temperature' will be a pleasure." She smiled and accepted the thick packet and itinerary he handed her across his broad desk.

In the two weeks before the trip began, she had her already short auburn hair trimmed, bought a few eminently packable clothes, and stocked up on alcohol wipes and novels she'd wanted to read. Every day she took long, brisk walks around her Arlington, Virginia, neighborhood to make sure her new shoes would be comfortable. Departure day soon arrived.

The tour group had fewer women traveling alone than usual, and had attracted more comfortably middle-aged, seasoned travelers, with the exuberant exception of the teenage girls. As the trip proceeded, Eugenia observed that security in the various countries was more conspicuous, but not necessarily tighter. Still, it had its effects. She observed that compared to previous tours, fewer people strayed from the group or spent ostentatiously. Evenings, they tended to stay in the hotel unless the tour had a planned outing.

By contrast, the girls did whatever, whenever, wherever. Their putative chaperone did nothing to dampen their high spirits or prevent their dashing away from the others, chattering while docents talked or tormenting the tour's series of impassive bus drivers.

—"not without me, he wouldn't!"—a head toss—"I couldn't believe"—"there's nothing about him that"—"I'm not saying there was anything wrong or anything"—"my mom always"—"bright pink with a grey stripe like this"—a diagonal gesture across a T-shirted chest—

Caught up in their own dramas, the girls rebuffed Eugenia's attempts to befriend them, and she reluctantly abandoned her efforts. Unfortunately, the harder she tried to avoid the girls, the more she encountered them. She literally stumbled into them at an archaeological dig covering a great many Greek acres; they selected, out of so many choices, the same café in St. Mark's Square; and yesterday, the tour having arrived in Spain, she

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rounded a carefully clipped hedge in the Alhambra once again right into their midst, so that they flew away like a scattering of bright pigeons. She couldn't help but smile after them, even though they had knocked into her rather sharply and trod on her toes.

—"no, I never"—"can you believe"—"not him, that guy over there"—the flock turned as one—"see her dress today?"—"and then my sister"—"you don't know what you're talking about. Again"—"sort of blue-green with silver sparkles"—

When Eugenia learned that she and the girls were the only members of their tour group to sign up for a day excursion from Spain to Tangier, she was immediately apprehensive. For her it would be a tame adventure, one she planned to write about, but for them—carelessly beautiful, blondly American—what kind of trouble might they get into? There were the ever-present drugs and petty crime, there was the potential anti-Americanism, and the admittedly very remote possibility of some terroristic occurrence. The chaperone had announced she would not be going—what was she thinking?

Eugenia's dreams that night were filled with kidnappings and extortion, and endless looping interrogations by uncomprehending foreign policemen. In the shower, she talked to herself firmly. If there were any problems, she reasoned, they would of course have a guide and, anyway, she was an infinitely more experienced traveler than the chaperone and likely to be a lot more help. In fact, who better?

Promptly at 4:30 A.M., Eugenia was the first to take advantage of the meager breakfast the staff was setting out for the hotel's Morocco-bound guests. She wrapped an extra roll for later and walked outside to await yet another tour bus. In ones and twos, people from other tour groups slowly assembled under the portico. The girls did not appear.

Eugenia sat on a bench by the front door and took out her guidebook. It diplomatically pointed out that many Moroccan women still wore the head-to-toe robes it called "Arab dress" and that visitors should respect these traditions of modesty in their own attire. This was a stricture Eugenia would have no trouble meeting at any time, but today she saw that the others waiting with her, regardless of nationality, adhered to it as well.

Beyond the hotel portico, the night was still so thick and black that the bus's sudden arrival was a surprise, even though they all waited for it. Their Afritour representative, overweight and with enormous bags under his dark eyes, waddled quickly toward them. He waved a sheet of paper like an excessively starched handkerchief.

"*¿Está toda?* All?" he asked.

"Several more should be coming," said Eugenia. She glanced

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over her shoulder at elevator doors closed tight as a bank vault. A slight anxiety grew inside her, as if it were she about to miss the bus. The guide took out a pair of smeared wire-rimmed glasses and began reading the list.

When the dozen or so people present were accounted for, several people—several *señoritas,* in fact—were missing. He sighed deeply. Delay at the very first pickup point, with many more hotel stops ahead and sleepy people waiting in the dark.

"You may proceed to the bus." He waved vaguely in that direction. "I will call the room *nombres.* Everyone has the *pasaporte?"*

Eugenia selected a seat that, when the sun came up, would be on the bus's shady side; her quilted cotton purse was her pillow. She closed her eyes. Like-minded, her fellow passengers quieted quickly.

About twenty minutes later the girls surged aboard. "The front desk forgot to call us!" they announced to no one and everyone. Eugenia pretended to be asleep and soon drifted off in earnest.

When she awoke at their rest stop, the bus was full of people who had been picked up from several hotels. The sun was beginning to burn through the hazy grey shawl that night left behind on its westward journey. The coffee saucers and sugar packets were lined up on the café's counter, ready for the half-size cups of strong coffee. Eugenia smiled appreciatively at the dark young man behind the counter, but his eyes were on the girls who just then stumbled in, sleepy, yawning, stretching like cats. Shorts, torn jeans, tank tops, tube tops, backless, braless, explosions of hair, sandals revealing pedicures inspired by a jewelry maker's workbench—amethyst, ruby, emerald, sapphire, gold, silver.

On board the bus again, their guide introduced himself in English, French, and Italian—Michael, Michel, Miguel—and droned nonstop in a remarkable display of multilingual memorization until they reached the sea. One useful fact she did glean: They would take the hydrofoil from Tarifa at 10 A.M.

Blindingly white in the morning sunshine, the *Isla de Mallorca* gracefully awaited the score of colorful buses that brought its passengers. On board, Eugenia headed to her favorite vantage point at the top deck's stern rail, where she could see both ahead and behind and feel the fresh sea-tasting breeze. She jotted in her notebook how Tarifa's bay was nearly encircled by land. The point on her right ended in a round tower and, on her left, a statue of a man, arms straight at his sides, stood sentinel for the traveler's safe return.

As the hydrofoil began to churn, Eugenia leaned against the railing and gazed toward Africa's Rif Mountains, rough as split boulders. Over the engine noise she heard a Moroccan guide explain that Tangier was named for Tingis, an African nymph who bore Hercules a son. To protect his child, the guide said, Hercules

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cleaved a mountain in two, splitting Africa from Europe and opening the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. The halves of this great rock are Gibraltar and Jebel Musa and have been known time out of mind, he said, as the Pillars of Hercules. For the ancients, they marked the end of the known world, which, Eugenia observed, was fast receding behind them.

To her, the Moroccan mountains' soft green foothills looked just like those of Spain, as if a ragged edge of that country remained attached when Hercules divided them. But any sense of familiarity prompted by the landscape evaporated immediately when the boat pulled into Tangier's harbor, and Eugenia saw awaiting them thirty or more local guides in striped *djellabahs,* ruby fezzes with black tassels, and, on their feet, yellow *babouches* with pointed toes and open backs. The green eyes that rarely missed anything were open wide. She inhaled down to her toes. Suddenly the sun was brighter, the heat deeper.

The Moroccan guides smoked and talked animatedly in constantly reassorting clusters. Several slightly disheveled young men attached themselves to first one group then another, gleaning tidbits of information—scavenger fish waiting for some morsel to break loose from the main meal and drift profitably their way.

Eugenia was one of the first of her tour group to arrive on the dock. In her long sand-colored skirt, her pale blouse and straw hat the soft shades of the sun-drenched Moroccan buildings, she moved through the dockside crowd without attracting a second look. She even stood right at Michael's elbow as he surveyed the passengers on the dock and asked, "And where's the lady with the hat?"

Michael's group was now in the hands of "our local guide" Hassan. Hassan led them briskly through the long hydrofoil terminal, sparsely furnished with only a few rows of high-backed steel benches and, at this hour, empty of other passengers. Security was relaxed. Passports had been collected on board ship, with few formalities and no delays. The terminal's one uniformed guard took charge of Michael's battered participant list, gave Hassan a cursory nod, and waved them through. Yet another tour bus idled right outside.

It bounced through the city's outskirts into the countryside, past high-walled summer homes of sultans and kings guarded by serious young men carrying serious automatic weapons. Right next to luxurious palm-shaded compounds, whose bright hibiscus and bougainvillea spilled over high walls, she saw run-down houses of grey, unpainted stucco with scrawny goats poking in the barren yards. Soon the bus made a prearranged stop for photos with a dusty camel. Hassan warned in the day's three languages—each hopelessly distorted by the bus's crackling public-address system—that at this stop the ever-present gypsies would try to sell

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them silver bracelets and spoons.

"They will tell you they are real silver," Hassan warned. "Don't believe them. They are fake." Indeed, as the gypsies wound through the crowd of tourists, they murmured, "Reel silver." "Silver spoon?" "Bracelet, cheap." "Silver, lady."

Although Eugenia was not about to mount the scruffy hissing beast, the girls, of course, did. —"Why not?"—"not afraid"—"What do you say to a camel?"—"Whoa!"—"I'm slipping"—"not my idea"—"Help!!"—"I notice *she* isn't"—"Where's my camera?!"—

Hassan moved the group efficiently through stops at several beautiful homes and small museums. They sipped mint tea in a restaurant overlooking the beach. Finally, they entered a short tunnel, an ancient gate to the medina. Hassan brought them to a stop, turned, and said, "Now, come with *me* to the Kasbah." Hopelessly corny, but still Eugenia felt goose bumps on her arms.

She soon discovered the narrow winding alleys of the Kasbah of her imagination, but also wider passageways and sunny open squares. A young gypsy boy appointed himself Hassan's assistant and stood alongside any uneven step or stone and, as they slipped by single file, mechanically repeated, "Watch your step," for each member of the group and, "This way," at each turning. Around the next corner there he was again, back at the head of the line, ready with another advisory.

The boy had a grey cast to his skin, a permanent dusty film. Like the other gypsies Eugenia had observed that day, he had an unsettling gaze. Something either was not there or was closed to her. When he looked at her, he fixed on a point just at the edge of her eye, not on the point where they might learn each other's secrets, the aptly named pupil.

They ate lunch in a high-ceilinged restaurant that buzzed with mosaics. Eugenia and the French couple she sat with enjoyed the tagines and Moroccan-style tapas immensely, but others in their group worried down only a few cautious bites. Later, at the officially sanctioned shops, only one or two tentatively bargained. Eugenia was tempted by some of the jewelry and tried on a poison ring with an ingeniously concealed latch, but in the end, purchased a bracelet whose negotiated price pleased both her and the seller.

Many of the tiny shops they passed were completely open to the alley and filled with bright *babouches,* a thousand shades of thread, pyramids of dates or olives. They watched snake charmers and jugglers. From indeterminable places came wave after wave of mingled smells: fresh-butchered meat, burning olive pits, the sharp smell of kif—Morocco's hashish, bread baking, clogged sewers, laundry, and all the other odors of people and their animals living and working in tight spaces. Hassan had called the Kasbah "a two-thousand-year-old maze," and as they walked—"Watch your

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step"—and walked, Eugenia heard the Frenchman mutter to his wife, "Now I know what 'infinity' is."

"What's that?" the woman asked, and indicated something that hung in the front of a butcher's stall, dripping blood.

"A camel's head," said Eugenia.

"No. Surely not." The woman went closer and turned quickly back. *"Mon Dieu."*

When time finally came to return to the bus, they had to run a gauntlet of pushing and jostling vendors of clanging brass pots and plates that clashed like cymbals, suspect jewelry, black, red, and mustard-colored leather bags, prayer rugs, carvings, everything portable they had seen in the bazaar and more. With a strategic dip of her broad hat brim, Eugenia could screen out most of this desperate army, but the Frenchwoman, buffeted by screaming pitchmen, started to panic. Eugenia and the woman's husband moved close to shield her on each side.

Gratefully, the harried tourists clambered down a dozen stone steps to the safety of the bus, where they found the gypsy boy ahead of them once again, this time with his hand out for tips. When the bus reached the hydrofoil terminal, everyone collapsed exhausted on the steel benches and concrete floor to wait while some last-minute repair was made to the ship and their passports were returned to them. Back on familiar ground, the busloads of visitors now bravely shared their adventures and displayed their purchases.

Eugenia put on her new bracelet and looked around, astonished. No wonder the street hawkers had been so insistent. The tourists, so cautious in the well-regulated bazaar, had lost all restraint in the press of the street, and their accumulated booty soon turned the sterile waiting room into a small bazaar.

Across the room, the girls had their own piles of purchases. –"been waiting forever"—"who has cigarettes?"—a new leather case brought out—"never buy your own"—"think she'll like it?"—"sort of wavy in front, then pulled back"—a new scarf tied around unruly hair—"I love it!"—

Eugenia took out her notebook to record her impressions of the day. This task so absorbed her that she didn't immediately notice the handsome young man wearing an ivory *djellabah* who quietly sat down beside her.

"A nice piece," he said softly, indicating her new wooden bracelet, dark as night and studded with tiny brass stars. "Did you find it in the Kasbah?" Like Hassan, he emphasized the second syllable.

"Yes, I did." She smiled.

"You are American?"

"Yes, I am." She was suddenly conscious that her passport still lay in her lap.

"How did you like my country?" He crossed his legs under the

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long garment and listened intently to Eugenia's recitation of what she had found particularly interesting and lovely. When she mentioned a pale green women's mosque, he interrupted.

"Oh, yes! I know that one. My mother often goes there. It is tiny, as you say, but very pretty inside, she tells me. And the color—like candy, don't you think?"

"Like candy—yes, like candy mints."

"Yes." He nodded and idly stared at the foot of his crossed leg. He had the handsome, dark looks of a younger Hassan, and wore the guides' robe and fez, but Western shoes.

"You had our mint tea?" he asked.

"Very refreshing. A treat." Then she added, "Do you think the delay will last much longer?"

"Oh, I hope not." He smiled and drew a long wooden box, about three inches high and wide, from inside his robe. "I am taking this to my wife for her birthday. She works in Tarifa, in a hotel. Very nice." He barely muttered this last aloud.

Ashamed that his wife works, she thought. Especially at a job where she serves, or more likely cleans up after, foreigners.

"They are five silver . . ." He paused, his English failed him. With apologies, he made a graceful u-shaped gesture over his chest.

"Necklaces!" Eugenia laughed.

"Yes, necklaces. Five. All very beautiful. Silver." He shook the box gently and cocked his head to hear them rustle in their paper wrapping.

Reel silver. The phrase echoed in Eugenia's mind.

"Your wife will be very pleased with such a fine birthday present."

"Yes. I want to take them to her myself." He frowned.

"Of course."

"She would be so happy to see me."

"It would be a lonely birthday without her husband."

He sighed and stroked the smooth wood of the box. "But the longer we wait, I don't know . . ."

Eugenia sat back. She studied the pale, slightly frayed embroidery at the neck of his robe. Its wide sleeves hid the precious box from everyone but her. She smelled cheap cigarette smoke and another acrid odor she couldn't quite identify. She saw how his eyes studied her, but when she looked directly at him, they shifted minutely to the side.

Later she never could decide why the hair on the back of her neck suddenly stood out, or why fear crept up her scalp and settled in her brain. She quickly busied herself by putting her passport into a zipper pocket of her handbag to cover the involuntary shiver that ran up her arms and shoulders.

"If I arrive too late, I will miss my ride back to Tangier tonight."

"Is there a late boat?" Eugenia was doubtful.

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"Some of my friends—businessmen—are coming back on a private boat. They have made arrangements for me with the immigrations and the customs. It will be easy, and I will not miss my work tomorrow." His hands rose in a universal gesture of "What am I to do?"

Eugenia waited.

"Now I will have only a few moments with my wife." He looked at the waiting-room clock. "Maybe I should not go. But I wanted her to have her present." He held the box slightly closer to Eugenia, inviting her inspection. "To my wife it will be very dear."

Wild horses would not get me to take this man's package into Spain, she thought suddenly. If she felt she had passed unnoticed through the day, this man had seen her, had seen who she was and understood it, and how it could help him.

She stood up at once and smiled her brightest smile. "Then, for all our sakes, I hope we leave very soon! Please excuse me, but I see someone across the room whom I promised to speak with."

Eugenia walked briskly over to join the French couple. As they talked, she watched the young man over the other woman's shoulder. He surveyed the room carefully and wound slowly among the benches and around the people clustered on the floor. Without haste, but with purpose, he walked over to where the girls talked and laughed amid a tumult of shopping bags and carryalls. He positioned himself next to the largest mound, his back to them, apparently oblivious.

It happened so smoothly that Eugenia would not have noticed if she weren't watching so closely. He took a step back, a very small step, that disturbed the pile of purchases. Trays and cuspidor-shaped planters clattered down. The girls shrieked. Surprised, then deeply apologetic, he helped them regather their loot, and spoke softly to them the while. Even they stopped chattering to listen, amused at his profuse requests for pardon.

As he neatly rearranged the items, the long wooden box slipped out of his sleeve and fell onto a pile of prayer rugs. Eugenia could almost read the girls' lips as they asked him what it was. In a moment he sat on the floor among them, talking, turning the box this way and that, holding it—almost—out to them. She saw him smile, puzzle over a word, and make a u-shaped gesture over his chest. He held up five fingers.

No!—Eugenia's eyes flashed. —No! You are not going to embroil these naive, thoughtless, generous girls in some smuggling game of yours!—

As she saw he was about to make his move, she made hers. She abruptly left the startled French couple and walked around the perimeter of the room, avoiding the girls' encampment. Michael was speaking in Arabic with a young guard.

"Excuse me. Sorry." She nodded to the guard. "I must speak with you, Michael. It's urgent. Important. You know the girls in our

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group? The large group of young girls over there? Sitting on the floor?" He gazed directly at her and did not follow the motion of her head. "The ones who were so late this morning?"

"From the Hotel Costa España."

"Yes." She nodded. "They're part of my tour group, so I know them, and I—sort of—look after them." She paused, uncomfortable. "That young man talking to them—there's something wrong about him."

"He is Moroccan, no?"

"Yes, but that has nothing to do with it. I think he wants them to carry something back—back to Spain—on the boat with them, for him. He's not going, you see."

"But he is here. In the embarkation terminal."

"Yes, but he's not going. I'm sure of it. He has a box that he says is a present for his wife, in Tarifa. I think he wants them to take it to her."

"How do you know this?" interrupted the Moroccan guard.

"You speak English?" With relief, Eugenia shifted slightly in his direction. "Because he sat next to me first, and he talked about the box."

"And now he sits with the pretty young American girls?" Michael looked slyly at the young man.

Annoyed, Eugenia pressed on. "He was going to ask me to take it, I'm sure." It sounded worse and worse.

"He looks harmless." At that moment the young man was smiling with pleasure at the girls' presentation of their purchases. He handled each object with care and nodded a knowing approval.

"I know—I absolutely know—he was going to ask me to take the box. Everything was leading up to it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean there is something very wrong about that young man, and I think you have nothing to lose by at least checking into it." She gazed so directly at the guard that he moved uneasily and muttered to Michael in Arabic.

"You are making a serious accusation," Michael countered. "If I understand, you say this man has some kind of contraband, you say he wants to smuggle it across an international border, a border where already there are deep tensions and suspicions, and you say he wants to persuade foreign nationals to carry this whatever-it-is for him."

"Exactly." Eugenia bit her lower lip, suddenly aware of the dangerous implications that sprang from her uneasy feeling.

The guard started to walk slowly in the direction of the young man. Michael, after a moment, moved to join him. He looked back over his shoulder and said in a low tone, "I hope you haven't made a big mistake, *señora.*"

The young people were all laughing when they noticed the two men standing over them. The guard spoke to the young man qui-

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etly, and a puzzled look replaced his smile. He seemed to answer the guard with a question, and the guard gestured over his shoulder in Eugenia's direction.

The young man looked directly at her, hard. She did not flinch. Then he made some comment to the guard and laughed. The guard shrugged and shook his head and helped the young man up. As the two of them walked to the terminal's curtained office, the girls pressed Michael to explain. He, too, gave a backward glance at Eugenia. As he walked off, the girls stared at her disgustedly.

This time Eugenia did avert her eyes. She sat down on a bench against the wall and studied a travel folder she found in her handbag. A few of their remarks reached her across the room, quieter now as the rest of the tourists sensed some sort of official drama unfolding.

—"can't let him just go like that"—"what's she got against"—"who asked her?"—sputtering like cats—"not fair"—

A tiny doubt fluttered high in Eugenia's chest. The other tourists had picked up on the girls' outrage and busily translated the story to one another. Many of them stared at Eugenia, her back to the wall, the color in her face deepening. A smile would not get her out of this.

The flutter grew more insistent and moved up into her throat, too large to swallow. As the moments ticked on, she turned the tour brochure over and over, and its ink stained her damp palms. At last the door to the office opened and the young man, overheated and angry, came out and sat on a chair just outside.

The supervisor leaned against the doorway and watched as the guard walked deliberately toward Eugenia, the wooden box in his hand. Michael angled over in her direction, too. Everyone else in the waiting room was absolutely still. The guard stopped in front of her.

"Yes?" Eugenia said, her throat dry and tight. She looked up, hopeful of vindication.

The guard's contemptuous look was her answer. She rocked back in her chair, shamed. Her throat felt as if it would burst. He thrust the wooden box under her nose and slid back its thin lid.

"Is this what you were so concerned about?"

There, in front of her, within pale blue tissue paper, lay five silver necklaces. Three had graduated beads, with the largest perhaps an inch in diameter, overlaid with a grillwork of filigree in different patterns; the other two were highly polished small beads, interrupted at intervals with a large filigreed bead. They were beautiful. Folded neatly on top was a jeweler's receipt, which the young man apparently had saved to present to customs.

"He told me they are for his wife's birthday," Eugenia said, with stinging eyes.

"So he told me, also," said the guard, and closed the lid. "I will return his present to him now." He took the box back to the young

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man, and he and the supervisor went inside the office and shut the door. Michael stared at her awhile, then walked back to the girls.

Eugenia bowed her head over the travel brochure. She noticed the drops that splashed the polychrome lovers on the sandy beach and rained on whitewashed hillside villages, but they didn't seem to come from her own eyes. Sorrow and shame of the soul demanded more than tears.

She did not notice that several of the girls went over to sit with the young man or that, eventually, he began to smile a little with them. From time to time he looked up from the box he held gently in his lap to glance worriedly at the wall clock. Nor did she see that finally one of the girls held out her hand for the box; nor that he, who had not dared to ask this great favor, looked so grateful and relieved.

Some twenty minutes later, the ship was finally ready. The weary passengers stood up, stretched, and gathered their many belongings. As they filed out, Eugenia lagged far behind and saw the girls shake the young man's hand—one impulsively hugged him—saw the guard open the office door and watch them leave, all but one headed for the ship. She passed by and did not look at him.

The return trip seemed endless. The other passengers pointedly ignored her. She managed to avoid the girls, who were glued to the snack bar. She stayed up on deck in the dark and let the sea spray mingle its salt with a few more tears. As they finally roared past Tarifa's stone sentinel, he glared at her.

The pretty blond American carrying a wooden box entrusted to her by a handsome Moroccan stranger walked unchallenged through customs. Outside, she walked up to a man standing near the dock's exit gate. He wore a fez and carried a bouquet of bright red flowers. She said something and must have received the response she had expected, because she handed him the precious birthday present without hesitation and ran to rejoin her friends. By the time Eugenia reached the gate, the man had disappeared.

The next evening, Eugenia sat in her hotel room in front of the blank screen of her laptop for many long minutes, pondering how to describe the trip to Tangier. The blinking cursor mocked her hesitation. She stared at her hands that rested on the keys. She gazed out her open window at the pool of light under the nearby streetlight. It illuminated laughing couples, businessmen hurrying home, families with happy children out for a stroll in the warm evening. In the distance, lighted cathedral towers stood out dramatically against the night sky. Finally, she typed: "Tangier is a rich cultural feast, a brilliant bazaar, a boisterous riot—so overwhelming a stew of tastes and sounds and sights and smells that you will mistrust your own senses." She stopped and thought some more. Almost involuntarily her right hand came up and made a small u-shaped gesture over her chest. She whispered to herself, "Even when you shouldn't." ●

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THE DRAGON'S BREATH

by Norman Keifetz

One gathers from Ingmar Bergman's films that when you experience a sudden chill, death has come calling but somehow luckily missed you. Some men of a certain age sense these near misses with a flash, hormonal changes being what they are, I guess. Sometimes I wonder how I'm still standing even "half made up" after certain brushes with the Furies. I'm forever ducking for cover, it seems, even when there really isn't anyone shooting at me. I feel I've escaped financial ruin, for instance, by convincing myself that I live on the edge of poverty, even though it's clear I somehow have money in the bank. As Matthew Arnold said, ". . . we are here as on a darkling plain/Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight . . ." No matter what internalized chicanery I resort to, I am aware that "they" can always get me. Who's they? Well, behold:

A prize-winning medical journalist for thirty years, Norman Keifetz managed to write three mainstream novels in his spare time: *Jack Is a King* (The Dial Press, 1962), *The Sensation* (Atheneum, 1974), and *Welcome Sundays* (G.P. Putnam, 1979). Recently he's turned his attention to the mystery short story. One of his stories appeared in our sister publication, *AHMM*, in 2004. This is his *EQMM* debut.

My daughter had come calling. She and my wife had planned to shop for shoes. My wife's asthma was acting up again; her breathing wasn't labored, as it had been just four years before when she was kept barely alive on a hospital respirator for ten of the worst days of my life and, equally, if one can ever really know another person's sense of dread, the lives of my grown children. At the time, my kids looked to me for comfort about Mom. I could see in their eyes and grim looks that they were bedeviled because their indefatigable Iron Mom was on the ropes for the first time in their lives, and I saw they feared the worst. They wanted something soft or at least hopeful from me, words they could not get from the young intensive-care physician, still wet behind his internship. I

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reminded them that Mom could be a tiger when cornered—even by a chill the likes of Bergman's.

At age four, an organism known as *Haemophilus influenzae* entrenched itself on the lining of my son's brain. "Meningitis," a doctor in pediatric intensive care pronounced. I'd written about diseases much of my life as a journalist. God, I thought, an infection on the lining of the brain. Burning fever, edema, pressure on the brain, possible neurological deficits, leading to disability or death. My little son lay comatose, hooked to an intravenous line that fast-dripped antibiotics. I couldn't leave his side, of course. So I maintained my vigil for two days, unshaven and unbathed in a corner of his room. I allowed myself to leave finally when he popped awake and I was sure that he knew I had taken his then-cool hand for the road back.

On the day my daughter came for the shoe visit, my wife complained of a thickening, a tightening—that harbinger of terror for an asthmatic and her husband. She had promised to take my daughter shopping for shoes for an upcoming party, an occasion where my daughter's usual soiled hightop sneakers wouldn't do. This was not to be an East Village bash but a garden party on the greens of Connecticut, ruled by convention. Perhaps I was the real instigator of this shoe outing because I can remember grumbling one day, not quite under my breath and clearly within the range of my wife's hearing, "I didn't know the Mammy Yokum style had become so proletariat chic." It was a loss of cool. As I've been bedeviled over the years by my own departures from convention, I've tried to maintain an even-headedness about my children's extravagances—colorful tattoos, recreational drugs, sudden school dropouts—but age, and maybe all that warding off of the Furies, had gotten me to react unkindly, without cool, to the footwear that I thought might keep my naturally graceful and beautiful daughter from universal adoration. Anyway, with my wife on the shelf, or at least near her nebulizer for the day, I agreed to go shoe-shopping, credit card in hand, as the parental stand-in. I took the task to mean I was to be encouraging if my daughter was unsure or couldn't quite make up her mind. In the end, we came away with four pairs, and the young saleswoman took my credit card with a naughty smirk and a revealing open-eyed look that said, What's this older guy doing with this pretty young thing in an antique oyster-shell dress covered by a United Auto Workers warmup jacket and hightop Keds? The saleswoman might have been surprised to know that my daughter, Esmé, teaches Russian literature two days a week at one of our big local universities and the rest of the time translates Slavic documents for a small company housed in a brownstone in the East 90's that shares space with a Buddhist study center.

To be sure, the moment the saleswoman stamped me as a sugar

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daddy and, therefore, my daughter as a gold digger, it stirred Oedipal concerns in me. Was it my body language? My in-store urging of her to take the extra pairs? Was it the way I took out my credit card? I didn't think I'd flourished it or pulled it out in such a way as to indicate I was the Man in this companion's life. And after all, the saleswoman had only looked at me funny, or so I thought. She didn't actually say anything. If she had known Esmé, my daughter's occupation wouldn't have surprised her because we had all spoken some Russian at home, since my grandparents made it impossible not to. Even my wife, with her Scottish-Irish genes, could hold a fumbling conversation in Mother Russia, our family's way of saying "talking the mother tongue."

For some reason my mind flashed again on my wife clinging to life that time, kept alive by the fortune of advanced medical technology. I wanted to rush home and see how she was doing with her asthma. I used my cell phone instead to tell her we had just bought four pairs of shoes, and to reassure myself that she hadn't been engulfed by the Furies. "Four?" she asked. "Why four?" I think I answered that I was trying to be encouraging.

"Klyovo! Khorosho!" she said, having reconsidered, I guess. My purchases for Esmé were now "Nifty! Cool!"

But had I told her the truth? Did I really buy our daughter four pairs of shoes? Or did I only imagine it was four?

Four is an unlucky number. I know that to the Chinese the number four warns of the coming of dragon fire. Any truly considerate dim-sum house carefully avoids providing four pieces to a serving. Aren't there four apocalyptic horsemen that roam the dark side of our unconscious? I weigh the threat of four in games of chance. Four is death, the Chinese say. Bad luck, anyway.

I still shudder when I think of it. As we were at the door to leave, two large men loomed. They were casually dressed: collared T-shirts, cotton slacks, windbreakers, clean sneakers. As it was a women's store, I fleetingly assumed they were there to join their own lady shoe buyers. The men pressed forward, pushing us back into the store. Now I saw the handles of guns in their shoulder holsters. A woman clerk approached, asking if she could help.

"Get on the floor," one of them ordered, "facedown!"

"What are you talking abou—? Oh—" the salesclerk said, and got down. Maybe she too saw their weapons.

I had stepped in front of Esmé. Daddy had to shield his little girl from these two big blond robbers.

"You too. Down!" one snarled. Both glared at me.

Esmé whispered in Russian—ironically, I thought, and wondered why—*Batya, shto sdelano mnoy dlya chelovechestva?* She had wanted to know: *Daddy, what contribution to humanity have I made today?* I was puzzled, but not for long. She'd pushed me out of the way before the shots rang out. The two men were hit in the

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chest, and fell back, perhaps dead. The glass door was shattering, shards raining down, some standing upright in the carpet. The noise was terrifying. Esmé's backpack had been ripped open by her own firepower. She pulled her gun out, tossed her backpack aside.

Wait! My little baby . . . a gun? Shooting? Killing?

"Daddy, call the cops!" she said. "And stay down!"

Stay down? I was about to pass out. Once during a romantic crisis of hers, she was so sad and blue I told her she'd get over it in time, that I loved her with all my heart and soul, that even if they came to me with ironclad proof that she was a serial killer, I would still love her. She was my baby, my little girl. Now I wondered if I would be asked to prove it under those givens.

"They're bad people—thugs, gangsters, murderers," Esmé said, "and there are two more outside, behind parked cars, just in front."

I called 911, told the operator there'd been a shooting, gave the address.

The operator wanted to know when.

"Now! Right this minute!"

I wondered if the emergency operator heard the bullets blasting into the store, through the remaining windows. Or the chilling hail of glass.

Police sirens sounded. The men behind the cars started to move. Esmé dropped one of them. The cops corralled the other. Now the police were taking defensive positions against us—rather, against Esmé.

"FBI!" she yelled. "FBI!" She tossed her gun out. Then she followed with her hands up.

FBI? My little Esmé? She's not even thirty years old. When would she have joined the Bureau? Where would she have trained? It's true she had her own apartment. We didn't have our eye on her minute by minute. But we'd always talked on the phone. She came to most family birthday celebrations in restaurants around town, sometimes dragging that beau of hers, the one who jumped out of the window, figuratively, that is. Anyone who would leave my beautiful daughter must have had suicidal thoughts. So where and when did she train to be a Fed? Where are recruits trained—in Virginia, like the CIA? Through her late teens and early twenties she'd marched, maintained vigils with other concerned citizens against the injustices of government and politicians local and federal. Was she undercover then too? When had she become a federal agent? Was that why her beau had left? He didn't want to be with a federal agent?

I got up with loose splintered glass shards falling from my back, raised my arms, and joined my daughter outside. The cops ordered me to "Drop it!"

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Drop it? Drop what? Then I realized I was still holding the plastic bag with the four shoeboxes. I put them on the sidewalk. When I stood, Esmé told me, "They were Russian mafia . . . assassins."

"Who?"

"The dead."

I wondered how long my little baby had been killing Russian assassins. I felt like someone under a volcano, unable to stay in one place, constantly ducking molten lava. I was depressed. I saw my little girl ducking the lava, too.

"Mostly, Daddy, I just listen in on their conversations, and translate them."

Now, of course, more assassins would come after her. Esmé would undoubtedly be sent elsewhere, another state, under a new name, some protective scheme for "made" agents. Would she teach Russian literature in Madison, Wisconsin, or Tucson, Arizona?

I got home hours later, though I must say the Feds came quickly to sort out the disbelieving police. I had called my wife from the station house to say Esmé and I had decided to have a drink and a light early supper. She was pleased. "Father and daughter. Sweet." It didn't matter that we never dined or drank.

When I got home, my wife thought I looked tired. I was going to say, "Don't ask." But I caught myself, and said, "Too much shoe shopping, but in an odd way stimulating and exhausting."

"Did she have a date? Was she seeing someone after your dinner?" my wife asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Why are you asking?"

"Because you're still carrying the shoes."

After listening to my lamentations, you'll not believe this: I now think of myself as one of the fortunate. Things are looking up. My grandfather used to say, "Don't worry. We're protected by St. Zosima and St. Laur." I learned much later that those saints were the guardians of bees and horses. But they must also have been the ones guarding *us* against those Russian assassins. Somewhere along the road the Fates must have decided to protect us. My wife's doing fine, my handsome son grown so lithe, and my newly shod daughter—(Oh, she got reassigned. Maybe they've got her listening in on the Russian Prime Minister)—I can't say where she is, but the shoes did follow her. Whether she ever wears them, I never ask. We all hope she's had pleasant occasion for using them all—the dress shoes, the two sporty pairs, and, of course, the sandals. For all I know the feds have fitted her for boots—with secret compartments for a knife, mace, or a stun gun. But at least we're all still around, even if hot from the breath of the dragon. ●

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Art by Mark Evans

Makin' Up and Breakin' Up

by Jeremiah Healy

"Basically, Rory, country-and-western music today is just rap for rednecks."

The man sitting across from me on the new black wrought-iron furniture gracing the Lauderdale Tennis Club patio ought to know. Kel Tiptree told me he'd been in the business for over thirty years, longer than my entire lifespan. When he'd arrived and we shook hands, I pegged him a few inches taller than my six-one, though his cowboy boots' heels probably helped a little. He was dressed in black jeans and a loose-fitting long-sleeved shirt, his build kind of rawboned under it. The shirt was white, a good precaution against South Florida's blistering June sunshine. And his Stetson hat threw a shadow around his face and throat, also protecting his neck and ears from the harmful rays.

As a former pro tennis player, though, I prefer polo shirts, elastic-waistband shorts, and sunscreen.

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I said, "You told me on the telephone that one of the Fort Lauderdale detectives suggested I might be able to help you with a problem?"

"I hope so, Rory." Tiptree glanced around us, but everybody else was indoors, or on the far and shady side of the tiki bar, or using the swimming pool to cool off. "The police told me Marcy wasn't a missing person just yet, account of she'd been gone for only about twelve hours. Or fourteen, to right now. So I asked them if a private eye might could do the job."

Creator of the John Francis Cuddy P.I. series and (under the pseudonym Terry Devane) the Mairead O'Clare legal-thriller series, Jeremiah Healy came to crime writing after a career as a law professor. His novels and short stories are recognized as among the finest in the genre. This one stars P.I. and former tennis pro Rory Calhoun. ¶

It being a little after ten on that Wednesday morning, I did the math. "So, missing since eight o'clock last night?"

A nod, the brim of his hat throwing the shade to his belt buckle. "That's when Larry last saw her, anyways."

I had a pad and pen on the table next to me. "Could I get full names? And where they fit in?"

Another nod. "Marcy's short for 'Marsha,' spelled S-H-A at the end. Marcy Pickens, my backup singer. Larry's 'Lawrence Bornstein,' my road manager."

I wrote that information down. "So, you're on tour now?"

That seemed to stop him for a second. "Larry told me he'd booked advertising for the band all over this area."

"And he may have. I like listening to Reba McEntire and Martina McBride, Toby Keith and Keith Urban from time to time, but I'm not an avid fan of your kind of music."

Tiptree snorted. "Rory, my 'kind' of music isn't what you hear get played on the radio stations call themselves 'country.' In rock, or rhythm and blues, the older performers are able to cut new albums. Not in country, though. Heck, there aren't but two or three of us over fifty can get a contract anymore. All the record companies want are young guys and gals. There's even a singer who keeps his hat on all the time, afraid that the public won't want to hear him if they see he's bald on top."

Tiptree took off his Stetson, showing a meadow of wavy white hanks plastered by the sweatband into curls like Julius Caesar's.

"Even though I've still got hair, at fifty-four years and counting, I'm too old, Rory, and my music doesn't sound the way the record executives like. I do cowboy, bluegrass, and classic country. You think after the soundtrack from that movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* sold seven *million* copies, the companies'd come to their senses, experiment a little by bringing back the good stuff. But no."

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I was having trouble seeing where this fit into his problem. "Mr. Tiptree—"

"Call me Kel, please. Especially since I can still recollect the actor with the same name as yours."

It's "Calhoun," folks. My mother had a killer crush on Rory Calhoun from his cowboy roles, and when she found a marrying man with that surname, my fate was sealed.

"Kel, any reason you can think of why Ms. Pickens would want to . . ."

"What, run away?"

"Or disappear?"

Sturdy shake of the head. "No. None. Oh, she wasn't all that keen on coming down for this South Florida part of the tour." Tiptree waved his hand toward the sky. "Said it was the beginning of hurricane season and hotter than blazes."

There are times when you hear some words—or their absence—louder than others. "Are you or Ms. Pickens from here?"

"No. I'm a Texan, and Marcy told me she was born on a farm in North Carolina." Now Tiptree canted his head. "Why?"

"Most people who weren't born in Florida—or at least never lived here—say *'the* hurricane season.'"

Tiptree seemed to weigh that. "Well now, Rory, I'm pretty good on remembering words, account of writing and singing lyrics. No, she definitely said just 'hurricane season.'"

I wrote the phrase down next to her name. "If you're on tour, Kel, do you have a band traveling with you?"

"Just a fiddler. Can't really afford no entourage on what comes through the gate, so I play lead guitar, with Larry picking up bass players and drummers along the way."

"Any of the pickup people from here met Ms. Pickens as yet?"

"No. We finished up last weekend in Augusta—Georgia—on Sunday, then the four of us kind of dawdled our way down here in the RV. Larry's got some guys lined up for us, but we won't be meeting them until tonight for the sound check before our gig."

The four of us. "So, your fiddler is . . . ?"

"Oh, right. Young kid name of Washington, Earl. And before you ask, yeah, he's black, leastways his momma was. But he's as into our music as I am. You should hear his riff on my signature song, 'You Can't Change a Cheatin' Heart.'"

I vaguely recognized the title. "Kel, if Ms. Pickens is still missing through tonight, can you replace her in the band?"

A wave of sadness broke across the leathery features. "In the band, yes. In my life, no."

"You and she are a couple, then?"

"Coming up on a year now. And Rory, I don't know what your experience has been, but let me give you the short version of mine. I've gone through three wives and Lord knows how many girl-

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friends, from all the one-nighters to some real relationships. I was a drinker for a long time, and I nearly beat a guy to death with my bare hands for disrespecting my first wife in a bar. Since we weren't in Texas then, I did four years at hard labor for that one, but it didn't cure my temper. I've wasted most of my life and fortune, but I've got two good things left to me: the music, and Marcy. And if I had to rank them for you, she'd finish first."

I nodded.

Tiptree looked away for a moment, but this time less like he was checking for eavesdroppers. "There's another thing, too."

"Being?"

He came back to me. "Like I said, we travel in an RV. Well, you kind of need some protection, the places you park at all hours of the day or night."

Uh-oh. "A firearm?"

"Two. A revolver and a shotgun."

"And?"

"And when I realized Marcy was missing, I went to get the revolver, figuring . . . well, I'm not sure what I figured. But it was gone, too."

"The handgun, but not the shotgun."

"Right."

"Make and model on the revolver?"

"Colt, six-shot, snubby little barrel."

I'm no expert on firearms, but it sounded like a pretty typical Detective's Special, from a gentler time when officers didn't need seventeen rounds in a magazine plus one in the chamber. "You tell the police about this missing gun?"

Another sturdy shake of the head. "All the states we go through, I couldn't ever get permits for every one of them. And besides, I'm a former convicted felon, which I guess would keep me from getting licensed anyway."

His explanation made sense, in its own way. Including him not telling the police about any unregistered weapons.

Kel Tiptree joined his large, bony hands in a clasp of prayer, his eyes glazed from the heat or his hurt. "Please find my Marcy for me."

I put down my pen. "You have a recent photo of Ms. Pickens?"

"Since the police can't help, I've hired Rory Calhoun here to look for Marcy. I want you both to tell him anything he wants to know."

Tiptree then nodded and walked away from the RV, which was maybe two-thirds the size of a school bus, the sun bouncing off it and raising the temperature another ten degrees. The humidity had already hit the top. Or, at least, I hoped so.

When Tiptree announced my name, though, Larry Bornstein chuckled, and Earl Washington just looked at the road manager oddly.

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I said, "I'd like to talk with each of you, but alone. Is there anything you have to do that would make it more sensible for me to start with one versus the other?"

They exchanged glances.

"I gotta make some calls . . ." Bornstein speaking first, a New York accent, as he hiked his thumb toward the RV ". . . find a backup for Marcy if she doesn't show soon. So how about you start with Earl, since he's going to have to do the sound check with Kel and the sidemen *du jour?*"

Washington nodded in agreement before addressing me. "There's a picnic table over yonder. In the shade of that willow, though the benches might be older than the tree."

As we walked in silence, I tried to think how I'd describe the slim young man. His facial features were "Negroid," if that's a word you can still use. Strong brow; broad, flat nose; brown eyes set wide apart. But his hair was a shade of red I didn't think came from a bottle, and his skin just a little darker than a peach, with freckles sprinkled all over his cheeks. Tiptree had said his mother was black, so Washington's appearance wasn't exactly shocking, but I wondered how much abuse he'd had to take working in a country band performing in front of what I'd guess to be overwhelmingly white audiences.

As we sat down on the old bench, both of us trying to avoid splinters, Washington said, "Why don't we get it out of the way?"

Thinking he might have read my expression upon seeing him, I replied, "'It'?"

A grunted laugh. "Come on, man. Don't make me think you're stupid. 'What's a nice colored boy like you doing in a redneck band like this?'"

"Something similar crossed my mind."

"Yeah, well, it should've. Except for Charley Pride—who's near on retired now—you don't see many people of *any* color in country. But I think of it as just another kind of ethnic folk music, and it sure provides a fiddlin' man a living."

I nodded, taking out the photo of Marcy Pickens and Kel Tiptree, arms around each other's waist. "Would you say this is a pretty good likeness?"

Washington looked down at the curvy woman with streaked blond hair worn past her shoulders. "Yeah, that's Marcy, all right, except . . ." he squinted at her face ". . . this picture doesn't show the horns growing out of her head."

Washington looked up now, smirking.

I said, "You think she's the devil?"

"Probably. Or Eve with the forbidden apple, maybe? And Kel, he can't get enough of her cider."

"Is that having any impact on the band?"

"Impact?" Washington scratched his chin. "Well, Marcy sure

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sings on stage a lot more than the ones before her did."

Before her. "How long have you been with Kel?"

"Six years, but most people guess wrong about my age. I look twelve, but I'm actually twenty-three."

"Still, even that means you started performing pretty young."

"So did Stevie Wonder and Stevie Winwood, man. When the music's inside you, it has to get out. Be shared, like."

Okay. "Does Ms. Pickens singing more than the past ones take time away from your instrument?"

Another smirk. "Oh, I get it. No, Kel hasn't put me on the back burner. And I don't hate Marcy or resent her. Or even envy her. Kel Tiptree isn't exactly Casper the Friendly Ghost. It's hard enough sharing the RV with him, much less a bed."

There was something else there, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

"You got any more questions, man?"

"One. Any reason you can think of why Ms. Pickens would just . . . go away?"

"Woman likes to shake what *she* shares." Earl Washington smirked a third time. "Might be Eve found herself a better Adam."

Larry Bornstein's first question for me after I knocked and entered the RV was, "Calhoun, you ever have polio?"

"Fortunately, I was born kind of late for it."

Fiftyish, short, and paunchy, Bornstein pushed a button on his cell phone and gestured with an unlit cigar toward me. "Reason I ask, your right arm's so much bigger than the other one."

I was enjoying the air conditioning too much not to humor him. "From playing tennis."

Bornstein frowned as he sat behind a foldout card table that looked as though it held paperwork more often than plates. "You're a pro, like on the tour?"

"Was. For a while."

"Screwy name like yours from the movies, how come I never heard of you?"

Pity the folks running the diplomatic corps let this guy slip through their fingers. "I did mostly satellite events, once in a while qualifying for bigger tournaments."

A shrug. "So now you're a private eye."

"So now you're managing a singer who can't get a recording contract."

"Hah. Good one, Calhoun. We'll get along fine, you don't mind me busting your chops."

I took a seat that pulled out of the wall like his table. Bornstein was nice enough not to fire up the cigar.

I said, "Tell me about Marcy Pickens."

Another shrug. "Not much to tell. She came on-board in

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Nashville. Trying to hit it big, you know, but starting way too late."

I pictured the photo. "She looks only about thirty."

"Hah. Try thirty-four. Which is ancient for a rookie in this biz."

I thought about my own ageing out—or "injuring out"—of pro tennis. "But you took her on, anyway."

"Kel took her on. You ask me, Kel got one look at her and he was gone. I'm not sure if he even heard Marcy *sing* before he's introducing her to me and Earl as our new girl."

"Only she's stayed around?"

"Hey, Marcy's no dog. Country's a lot blander than rock or hip-hop, but she can still shake a pretty good booty."

Close to Washington's comment. "She stay faithful to Mr. Tiptree?"

"Faithful? Huh, that's a good one. You know how they say every country song is either about breaking up or making up?"

"No, but it's catchy."

"It's the truth. Let me tell you, I got started in music with a rock band. Forget the name, just know this: Those guys were pigs. They didn't even have the dignity to go punk, just covered a lot of songs by name groups from the early seventies. And what music and lyrics they *did* write were pure puke. Country, now, it's different. Alcohol, yeah, but no drugs. And it's 'Yes, sir' and 'No, ma'am,' too."

I could sense Bornstein warming to his spiel, but sincerely, not just as hype. He gestured again with the cigar. "The music, well, structurally, it's pretty simplistic. Just a melody to carry the lyrics. But the songs are 'real.' They actually *say* something, *mean* something. I'm telling you, Calhoun, it's the only way in this great land of ours to get paid for writing poetry."

"Marcy-Pickens?"

"What?"

"Has she written any songs?"

"No, no. I'm telling you, her musical talent is from . . ." Bornstein used one hand flat at his throat and the other down at his thighs. ". . . here to here."

"Do you think Mr. Tiptree really loves her?"

"Yeah. And, to be honest, I think she 'really' loves him, too. But don't try to convince Junior of that."

"Junior?"

"Earl." Bornstein's eyes narrowed. "What, Kel and him didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

Now an exasperated expression. "Earl . . . is . . . Kel's . . . son."

Thanks, client. "No, they didn't mention that."

"Yeah. Not a lot of resemblance, but the kid sure inherited the talent. And, I gotta say, Kel is a real stand-up guy. I think the word the courts use is 'acknowledge.' Kel admitted he was the father, sent the mother money to help raise him, even went to visit the kid growing up, encouraged him on the fiddle. Then Daddy

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takes him into the show. I mean, if we were talking jazz here, no pro-*blame*-oh. But you should hear the crap they both have to put up with—a mulatto kid in a country band?"

I was thinking more about the age gaps instead. "Do you think there could be anything between Mr. Washington and Ms. Pickens?"

"'Mr. and Ms.'? What are you, an anchorman?"

"Just polite."

Bornstein gave me a sour smile. "From Earl's side, who knows, kids today. I've never seen her lead him on, if that's what you mean."

That's what I meant. "Any reason you can think of why Ms. Pickens would disappear?"

Bornstein frowned again, then pursed his lips. "Tell me, I say something to you, does it have to get back to Kel?"

I leaned forward. "I won't know that until I hear you out."

"No." Bornstein shook his head, but more deciding than disagreeing. "No, if I don't tell you, I'll kick myself from here to Music City, something happens to her."

He stuck his free hand into his pants pocket, came out with a crumpled piece of paper he smoothed out on the table. "Last night, around eight, I see Marcy on her cell phone, over by the picnic table. She's holding this piece of paper in her other hand. Marcy's talking all nice-nice from what I could catch, but it wasn't so much her words as her tone, get me? Only thing is, she hangs up, squeezes this paper into a ball, and tosses it at the trash can. Marcy doesn't notice that it hits the rim, and she doesn't pick the paper up from where it lands on the ground. What Marcy *does* do is walk away. Crying."

"Can I see the paper?"

Bornstein spun it to my side of the table. Just a telephone number, but the area code was 954.

Meaning Broward County, where Fort Lauderdale lies. And the exchange was one of those odd combos of numbers that suggests a cellular.

I said, "Mr. Tiptree told me Ms. Pickens wasn't happy about coming to South Florida."

"Yeah, well. When 'Ms. Pickens' first showed up, I needed her Social Security number for tax stuff. I also had a friend with a tie-in to the administration do a computer check."

Nice friend to have. "And?"

"And Marcy's last payments into the system came from a bar down here called Stompers, about three years ago."

I'd never heard of the place, but I did think back to her using "hurricane season" without the article. "Ms. Pickens worked down here at least for a while, then stopped for three years, and last night calls a Broward County telephone number."

Bornstein said, "Want to hear what I'm thinking?"

I didn't know if my client had told Bornstein or Washington about the missing gun. "Try me."

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Larry Bornstein pointed his cigar down toward his lap. "I think there was probably a sugar daddy before Kel, and Marcy's maybe attending a little . . . reunion."

I got back into my Chrysler Sebring convertible and stopped at the first pay phone I saw rather than risk losing anonymity by using my own cellular. When I dialed the number on Bornstein's piece of paper, I got two rings before a click and "Bro."

Male baritone, but raspy, as though he drank hard liquor straight.

I made it up as I went along. "We're on vacation down here, and somebody recommended Stompers as a good club to hit. Can you tell me if you've got live music tonight?"

A pause. "Who gave you this number?"

An implied threat. "Directory Assistance."

"Bro" clicked off on me.

I waited a few minutes, and sure enough he must have pressed *69, because the pay phone started ringing.

I picked up the receiver. "Stompers. Can I help you?"

"Who the hell is this?"

"Bro! How you doing, buddy?"

"Cut the crap. Now."

Another click.

I walked back to my car.

Next stop was the city clerk's office. The air conditioning there was subarctic, making me think of a friend with two young kids at the tennis club telling me she always bought sweaters for holiday gifts to keep her offspring from freezing to death in school.

With the help of a very knowledgeable municipal employee, I found Stompers' application for a liquor license. It nicely required the location of the proposed establishment and the name and home address of the applicant, too. One "Breau Shackleford."

Pronounced "Bro," I wagered.

Over the years, friends had dragged me into a couple of country-and-western clubs, which was how I discovered the good music of Reba, etc. Stompers, however, reminded me more of a Hooters, with the same emphasis on the bartenders' "appearance" but adding cowboy hats and boots to the women's outfits, bearskins and steer horns to the walls.

It was only going on two P.M., and the place wasn't crowded. The few patrons had long-neck Coors or Miller bottles in front of them and their heads on swivel mode, appreciating the bartenders prancing around. Spotting three empty stools at a corner of the bar itself, I took the middle one, hoping for a little privacy.

A bouncy twenty-something with curly brown hair and an aura of fun clogged over to me from a cash register inside the bar enclo-

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sure. "What can I getcha?"

Her nametag had branding-iron calligraphy that spelled "AMBER." I stood up on the stool rung, looked down at her feet. "How do you make it through a shift wearing those things?"

"The boots?" A shrug with the hint of a smile. "Better than what I wore—but didn't get to keep on much—at my last job."

I liked that, Amber not afraid of getting it out there while showing she could hold her own in the bantering department. I hoped my using her wouldn't end up hurting her.

I said, "Worked here long?"

"Near a year."

Which meant the photo of Marcy Pickens would mean nothing to her. "Breau around?"

"Uh-unh. Haven't seen him today. Or Coley, for that matter."

"Don't think I've met Coley."

Amber seemed surprised. "You know Breau but not . . . Coley?"

"Describe him."

"Don't have to. You saw Coley, you'd know him." Amber leaned across the bar and lowered her voice. "Some wild cowboy-wannabe can't contain himself in here, Coley puts the 'stomp' in Stompers."

Great: the bouncer. "Any idea when Breau and Coley might come in?"

"No. I got off at eight last night, but didn't see them before then, either."

"Breau still live in that place on Northeast Sixteenth Avenue?"

Amber showed me just a hint of tongue between her lips. "Uh-huh."

"Well," I laid a five on the bar. "For your time, if not your trouble."

A little more tongue. "Speaking of time *and* trouble . . . I get off tonight at eight, too."

Liking Amber even better, I said, "Hope to see you then," meaning it in terms of both sex and survival.

The three-story "Italianate villa" that matched the home address on the liquor-license application backed onto a canal, privacy hedges separating the closely bunched neighbors. There were two vehicles in the semicircular drive, that small convertible Cadillac makes and a Dodge Ram pickup. I pegged the yellow stucco exterior and roof of orange tiles as the ugly spawn of a teardown, since the predominant housing stock around it consisted of ranch-style homes that fit the setting better. Five years from now, there'll be two ranches left and twenty more monstrosities, shoe-horned into the footprints of the original structures. South Florida's idea of architectural manifest destiny. Unfortunate, but something you can make use of in my business.

I left the Sebring in the shade of a magnolia tree across the street from Shackleford's villa, stopping to alligator-clip a laminated ID

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card onto my polo shirt's open V. The card has my portrait (courtesy of the state's Department of Motor Vehicles) and a fictitious "real-estate appraisal" company name embossed below it. Taking out a clipboard with some appraisal forms, I walked up to the driveway, sweating already and beginning to take notes on the house itself.

I figured Breau Shackleford might have motion detectors covering his grounds—not to mention Coley the Bouncer guarding his back—so I moved up to the front door and rang the bell, establishing my cover story of appraising a ranch down the street for its own teardown. After a minute, no answer.

I tried the bell two more times. Still nothing.

Deciding I'd done my best to reinforce the cover, I began walking around the corner of the house toward the canal, still jotting notes. When I got to the back, I saw the obligatory swimming pool, too short for swimming laps but essential against the heat of summer. A twenty-foot runabout lazed at the dock on davits to keep the hull from banging against the pilings. An open-cockpit kayak and paddle, with the blades flat, not feathered, rounded out the toys of Shackleford that I could see.

I turned to the house. There seemed to be a playroom on the first floor to my right, a billiards table partially visible, a couple of cue sticks and balls lying motionless on the green felt. The kitchen was in front of me, and down the hall I could just see the foot of the staircase to the second floor.

And a woman with long, streaked-blond hair, naked except for a pair of torn panties, slide down the bottom step as if her rump was a toboggan before being grabbed by the upper arms. Two huge hands hauled her back upward, kicking and thrashing but beyond my line of sight.

I dropped the clipboard, took out my cellular, and dialed 911. After a one-sentence summary while I quick-marched toward the water, I clicked off the phone, picked up the kayak by its cockpit gunnel, and ran it at ramming speed toward the window into the playroom, doing a pretty good job of creating a man-sized hole and a nerve-curdling klaxon alarm. Yanking the kayak back out, I used it as a makeshift stepstool to get me through the opening. A shard of glass slashed a long but shallow cut into my left forearm. Once inside, I scooped up two billiard balls from the table and put them in the left pocket of my tennis shorts, as though I were going to serve them up.

Heavy footfalls began coming down the stairs, so I picked up a cue, too, gripped its tapered end like I was choking up in the batter's box, and backed against a wall next to the doorway.

A huge guy stormed through, moving directly to the broken window. I registered no weapon, tattoos on both burly arms, and a shaved head before I realized he hadn't bothered to put his pants on.

I figured this one for Coley.

Stepping forward, I swung the thick end of the cue at the back of

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his skull. Maybe sensing me, Coley turned quickly enough to catch the blow squarely on his nose. There was a crackling sound a millisecond before the thumping one, and a volcano of blood and snot erupted from the center of his face.

He bellowed in pain and anger, dropping to his knees, both hands coming up to cover, if not treat, the damage.

I shuffled sideways and drove the butt end of the cue as hard as I could into his left temple.

Coley crumpled, all fours on the floor now.

I turned and ran for the stairs. Taking them two at a time, I'd reached the top when I heard the shot.

The first one, anyway, followed by two more that helped me locate the source, both by sound and that acrid smell of burned gunpowder.

A naked man I took to be Breau Shackleford was still on his feet, but lurching from one side of the massive bedroom to another, trying desperately and futilely to use the wallpaper as a handle on his balance. As tall as Coley, the boss sported no obvious alterations.

Except for the two holes in his chest, burbling blood.

The woman in Kel Tiptree's photo sat curled into a ball at the bed's footboard, a handbag with spilled contents on the floor between her big toes. The panties were completely gone now, and a short-barreled revolver lay half on and half off the bag, as though Marcy Pickens had just dropped it there.

Shackleford now became aware of me, though one eye seemed to focus left and up, the other right and down, making me hyperlink somehow to the glances of the little geckos scanning for insects at our tennis club. Close up, I could see a pink froth around the edges of each bullet wound.

"The bitch . . . help me . . . nine-one—"

The raspy voice from our brief telephone conversations.

"Already on their way, Breau," I said, keeping my distance, even with the slugs in him.

I needn't have bothered, as both his eyes rolled back, and Breau Shackleford toppled as if he didn't have a bone in his body.

I looked around quickly, saw a robe. Even if it was his, I thought Pickens might appreciate the gesture. But as I reached her and held it open, she waved me off.

"Thanks—" her voice surprisingly steady—"but I want the police to see the way these . . . animals left me."

I glanced out a front window. Two cruisers approaching from different directions fishtailed to a stop on the street, effectively blocking both the little Caddy and the pickup truck in the drive. Bubble lights flashed epileptically, but I didn't hear any sirens.

I said, "The police are here. I'll go down and let them—"

"No, please!" Then more quietly, "Don't leave me with . . . him."

I nodded.

Pickens closed her eyes. "I used to work in Lauderdale, at this bar

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of Breau's called Stompers. Then he said I didn't have to work anymore if I moved in with him. Seemed like a good deal at the time."

She sniffled and rubbed a wrist across her nose, the bruising on her arms vividly black-and-blue against fair skin.

Downstairs, the doorbell rang.

"I lasted almost two years. It was . . . rough, but not as rough as . . ." Pickens flicked her hand toward the bed.

Banging with fists now, a male and a female voice yelled, "Police, open up!" In the distance, I could just make out an ambulance's siren.

Pickens sniffled again and coughed. "Last May, I watched for my chance to get away, pocketed a few thousand cash from Breau's hidey-hole in the den, and took off. I waitressed, tried to break into singing, and met—" Pickens jerked her head up. "Did Kel send you?"

No need for specifics, and no time for them either, as I heard both the front and back doors being kicked in, the ambulance siren much louder now. "Yes."

She nodded. "Larry must have advertised better than usual, on account of Breau seeing something about the band. And me. He and Coley 'visited' the club here—our gig for tonight—and twisted some arms for my cell number. Left me a voice-mail."

"We've got one white male, down and bloody in a room, first floor rear."

Pickens said, "When I called him back, Breau told me if I didn't come see him at his house here, with the money I'd stole, he'd be at the club tonight with Coley and take it back. 'The hard way.' Well, Kel is a fine man, but he has a temper, and even with Earl and Larry thrown in, Kel wouldn't have had a chance against them."

I remembered Tiptree telling me about his prison time over the bar fight, but from what I'd seen of Coley and Shackleford, I agreed with her.

"First floor is secure! I say again, the first floor is secure."

Pickens shook her head. "So I took what little cash I'd put away from the tour—along with Kel's gun in my handbag, for protection—and came here by cab last night. They opened the front door, I handed Breau the money, and Coley clamped down on my arms till the bones bent. He dragged me up here, Breau following behind, slapping the bills against the palm of his hand and singing a lyric Kel wrote, 'The one thing you can't change is a cheatin' heart.'"

Feet climbing the stairs now. I laid down the pool cue and turned toward the doorway, my hands up and empty.

"The dumb bastards just dropped my bag in this corner, and . . ." From behind me, Marcy Pickens finally began sobbing. ". . . And then . . . they . . . they began to do . . ."

At that moment I decided Larry Bornstein was right about country music being all about "breaking up," if not "making up." ●

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China Blues

by Edward D. Hoch

Edward D. Hoch's Stanton & Ives series takes its readers to some far-flung places as the couriers turned amateur detectives deliver not only mysterious packages but justice to a colorful array of villains. Mr. Hoch tells *EQMM* that he particularly likes writing the stories in this series, and certainly they're something of a departure for him in having more thriller-like elements than his other work.

Landing at Beijing Capital Airport in the dead of night was no great treat. For starters, it was located some eighteen miles northeast of the city and Ives and I were headed southwest, to a little village on the Yellow River. Since neither of us spoke Chinese, we had to rely on our guide, a bulky man named Chen Yi who met us with a hand-lettered sign reading *Stanton & Ives.*

"That's us!" Ives exclaimed as if we'd just stepped off the plane in Chicago.

Chen Yi held out a gnarled hand. "You are Mr. Walt Stanton, the courier?"

"Correct, and this is Juliet Ives, my associate. We're transporting a package addressed to Dr. Niles Brandon."

He nodded. "I will take you to him. My car is outside."

"Is it a long drive? We're a bit sleepy."

He seemed puzzled. "You did not sleep on the aircraft?"

"Not well," Ives told him.

"Ah! It is perhaps a hundred miles to the Loess Plateau along the Yellow River. A two-hour drive. Maybe you can relax and doze in the backseat."

So we set off like that, with me in the front seat with Chen Yi while Ives curled up in the back with our priceless package. We hadn't been told the exact contents of the parcel, which was smaller than a shoebox, only that it contained urgent medical supplies needed by Dr. Niles Brandon in a remote Chinese village. Our client was a nondescript man who'd phoned our office and then come in for an appointment. He hinted there might be more work for us if this delivery went well.

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Ives immediately decided he was some sort of government type.

"If it was a government job they'd send their own people," I reasoned.

"Not if they wanted to be in the clear if something went wrong. They'd hire fools like us."

"You've been reading too many spy thrillers," I told her.

Ives had kept the package in her carry-on bag without declaring it, and it went through the X-ray machine without incident. By this time, nearly four years after launching our Stanton & Ives courier service, we'd seen just about everything and traveled to every continent except Africa and Antarctica. China was something new to us, though, and as dawn broke after the first hour of our drive I looked out the window at the barren countryside and realized we were a long way from New York City.

"Are we there yet?" Ives called out like a child from the backseat. "Soon, soon," our driver reassured her, but it was another hour before we reached our destination.

Gazing out at the increasingly desolate landscape of dusty soil, I asked, "What do these people do for amusement?"

"The farmers sometimes attend local strip shows and gambling dens, but the government cracks down on them. We are far from any city."

"What is this place called?" A gust of wind lifted a cloud of soil even as I watched.

"Loess Plateau," Chen Yi replied, turning off the road onto a narrow trail suited more for wagons than cars. "This soil you see has been deposited by windstorms over the centuries."

Ives studied it with some distaste as our car slowed down. "How can anything grow here?"

"In ancient times it was a fertile area," the driver assured us. "But the trees are gone now and overgrazing has made many farmers poor. The only thing that grows here are tyrants like Mao and Hsun."

"Mao?"

"During the 1930s he lived here in a yaodong, a home carved from the soil. Hsun is a local warlord who would follow in his footsteps."

"Are there any good restaurants around here?" Ives asked, staring at the bleak horizon.

"Not for many miles. If you were staying longer I might recommend a side trip to the Gobi Desert in Mongolia, where there is a large restaurant of concrete in the shape of a giant tortoise."

"Do they serve turtle soup?"

"I have never been there." He brought the car to a halt and opened the door. "But here we are. I have delivered you and your parcel to Dr. Brandon as instructed."

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"Thank you, Chen Yi," I said, taking some currency from my pocket.

He waved it away. "It is paid for," he said.

"How do we get back to the airport?" Ives wanted to know.

Chen Yi grinned, showing a gap where a tooth was missing. "I stay with you."

We made our way up a dusty path to what I supposed was a stone farmhouse, much sturdier than the other village buildings I could see, with a red tile roof topped by ornamental birds. The sun had somehow managed to burn through the haze and we could feel a promise of warmth in the air. Almost at once the door was thrown open and a young red-haired woman in jeans and a T-shirt greeted us with what could only be an Irish lilt. "Good morning to you! How was your journey?"

Surely this was not Dr. Niles Brandon. I offered my hand and introduced us. "It was long," Ives told her, answering the question I'd ignored. "Is Dr. Brandon here?"

"Not at the moment," the woman said, "but I'm his assistant, Clare Marvell. I can accept the package on his behalf." She glanced at it, resting on the desk where Ives had placed it.

She was friendly enough, but there was something about the whole setup that troubled me. Our instructions had been to deliver the medication directly into Dr. Brandon's hands. "How soon will he be back?" I asked.

She hesitated. "That's difficult to say. It could be a matter of days."

I looked at Ives. "I have an international cell phone," she told the redhead. "We'll have to call our client for instructions."

"Very well," she said with a slight smile.

"Are we in the same time zone as Beijing?"

"The entire country is in the same time zone, thirteen hours ahead of New York."

Ives tried her cell phone without success, then went outside and tried again. I looked at Clare Marvell, who was still smiling. "No reception here?"

"Of course not, unless you have one of those fancy satellite phones. This is rural China, not New York or London, for God's sake!"

I went to the door. "Give it up, Ives. There's no reception here."

I remembered our driver, Chen Yi, still waiting on the road, and went out to speak with him. "You don't happen to have a two-way radio in your car, do you?"

"Radio? No, no radio."

I sighed, resigned to a longer stay. "Look, we're going to be here for several hours, perhaps even overnight. Can you stay that long?"

"Is place to sleep?"

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"I'll arrange for something."

I went back inside to find Ives and the Irish woman engaged in an altercation. "You must give me the package," she was telling Ives. "It belongs to us!"

"Just a minute!" I said, parting them before they came to blows. "Tell me where I can find Dr. Brandon."

Before she could answer, I heard a horn honk. Clare peered out the window and told us, "It's Yang Yuxing and his hearse. Now what does he want?"

It was indeed a hearse that had pulled up in front of the stone farmhouse. A tall, slender Chinese dressed in black slid out from behind the wheel of the old hearse and came to the door. Clare flung it open before he could knock. "What are you doing here?" she demanded.

He smiled thinly, his face a mask of respectful firmness. "I have come for the body. You must give me the body today."

It was Clare Marvell who spoke first. "There's no body here. Be gone with you!"

"Dr. Niles promised a body. Today is the day."

"Well, he was wrong. There's no body."

"Where is the doctor?"

She shook her head and started edging him out with her hands. "I have visitors here. I can't talk to you now."

"Tell doctor I need the body today."

But she ignored the request, closing the door in his face. "What was he talking about?" Ives asked.

Clare shook her head. "It's one of the rural folk customs in this part of China, and not a very pleasant one, I might add. When a young man dies in an unmarried state, some families arrange an afterlife marriage. If they can locate a family who has recently lost an unmarried daughter they arrange to purchase the corpse for burial with their son as a married couple, so they might have a happy afterlife."

"You've got to be kidding!" Ives said, clearly showing her astonishment.

"No, no, it is all too true. As a traveling funeral director, Yang Yuxing does quite a trade in matching up grief-stricken families. It's illegal, of course, but he quietly arranges the deals between families and takes a cut of the payment."

"How much money are we talking about?" I asked.

"The going rate is ten thousand yuan or more, about twelve hundred dollars in American money. Only the wealthier farmers can afford it."

"But why would he come here?" Ives demanded. "Surely Dr. Brandon would have no part in such a macabre custom."

"Of course not. He might have seen your waiting car and imag-

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ined that some wealthy farmer had come here with a dying child."

Our journey seemed to be getting more bizarre by the moment. I glanced around at the sparse facilities. Other than an examining table off in one corner, there was no evidence that this rustic farmhouse was a physician's office. "You have no hospital facilities here," I pointed out. "Why would anyone bring a dying child to Dr. Brandon?"

"You should ask him," she replied. "Now give me the parcel."

I shook my head. "I'll deliver it only into his hands. Those were my instructions."

"Do you know what's in it?"

"Special medication of some sort. That's all we need to know."

She seemed to abandon her efforts then. "Niles was called to treat a local warlord," she said, brushing some stray red hairs from her eyes. "That was two days ago. He hasn't been back since. Usually I go with him, but this time he was alone."

"A warlord?" Ives asked. "This is the twenty-first century."

"China is a huge country," Clare said. "Some rural areas still exist in the past. The government tries to pacify them the best it can, but with someone like Lord Hsun it's hardly worth the effort."

"Hsun." Ives repeated the name. "Our driver mentioned him. He said Hsun and Mao had both lived in this area."

"About seventy years apart. Mao had greater goals in mind. Hsun seems content to exact protection money from the farmers."

"Is there no law to stop him?"

"Anyone who refuses to pay or goes to the local magistrate is likely to end up dead in his field with an arrow or two in him. The people pay up."

"And Dr. Brandon . . . ?"

She shook her head, revealing all the uncertainty she'd kept hidden until now. "I don't know. I don't know if he's alive or dead."

"Why would this Hsun want to kill him?" I asked.

"I don't know. I only know he's been gone for two days, and I need the contents of that parcel."

Something in her words spurred Ives into action. "Tell us where this man Hsun is and we'll go find Dr. Brandon. Stanton and I have experience dealing with the criminal element."

"But not in China," I quickly reminded her.

"They're all the same," she insisted. "Where is this man Hsun?"

"Ives—" I started.

But Clare was already responding. "About twenty miles along this road, at a place called Chen Jiay. He has a house originally used by the provincial governor. Be careful. He's guarded by a legion of archers."

Our driver knew the way to Chen Jiay, though at first he was reluctant to take us there. "Hsun is a bad man, a tyrant, a war-

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lord. One day the government will decide he has gone too far and stamp him out like a flea. Until then he rules the countryside with his archers."

"We'll handle him," Ives said decisively, displaying the sort of aggressiveness she usually reserved for our bedroom. She'd shaken off any drowsiness she'd felt earlier.

The provincial governor's house was the largest in the village, with a pair of bronze elephants guarding the main entrance of the two-story structure. The archers we'd been warned about were clearly in evidence and one even threaded an arrow to his bowstring as our car came to a stop. "You wait here with Chen Yi," I told Ives.

"Are you kidding? This was my idea. I'm coming along." She picked up the package and exited the car ahead of me, her long legs outpacing me up the steps of the house.

The guards hesitated to shoot. One of them merely grabbed her arm as she passed. "No come here!" he screeched in very broken English, followed by a burst of Mandarin neither of us understood.

"We've come to see Lord Hsun," I told him. "He is expecting us." I produced one of our business cards, knowing he'd be unable to read it.

The archer stuffed the card into his belt and motioned us to step forward. He frisked each of us thoroughly and quickly, though perhaps lingering longer than necessary on Ives's shapely curves. Then he motioned us down a corridor. Other than a faint scent of incense in the air, we might have been walking into a town hall somewhere in America. A Chinese woman greeted us at the entrance to Lord Hsun's office and asked us to state our business.

That was when Ives took over. "We have a package to deliver to Dr. Niles Brandon. We understand he is here with Lord Hsun and we demand to see him. It is a matter of urgent business."

She picked up the telephone and said a few quick words, listened, and gave a brief reply. "Follow me."

If we expected a rural Chinese warlord to be seated upon a throne, we were disappointed. He was tall and slender, with a moustache that drooped down the sides of his mouth, and he wore a fancy embroidered robe, but otherwise he might have been any businessman surrounded by filing cabinets and books. I looked in vain for a computer screen. If he had one, it was elsewhere. "I am Lord Hsun," he announced in passable English, but made no motion toward shaking our hands. "You desire to see me on urgent business?"

I produced another of our business cards, which he seemed to read without difficulty. "You are Stanton?" he inquired, and turned to Ives. "You are his wife?"

"His partner," she corrected. "We must see Dr. Brandon to deliver this package of medication into his hands."

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"Sit down," he said, motioning us to chairs. "This matter must be discussed."

"No discussion necessary!" Ives insisted. "We deliver the medication into Dr. Brandon's hands and our driver takes us back to Beijing Airport. That's all!"

"It is not that simple," Hsun told us. "Dr. Brandon is my prisoner here."

"Prisoner?"

"He has been stealing rare china-blue vases from my collection. I had no choice but to arrest him."

"If what you say is true, it's a job for the local authorities," I told him.

Lord Hsun smiled. "I am the local authority."

"At least let us see him."

His narrow eyes shifted to the package Ives was carrying. "What is in that?"

"Medical supplies, sent by courier from the United States."

"I will take those. If they are what you say, I may let you see the doctor."

"The package will be delivered to him personally," I said in my most authoritative voice. "That is the purpose of a courier service. He must sign for it."

"And I give the orders here," he said, his tone growing less friendly by the minute. "That is the purpose of the warlord." He gestured toward the books on the shelf behind his desk. "I have read about Genghis Khan and Fu Manchu."

"Fu Manchu was a fictional character," Ives pointed out. "He wasn't real."

"But I am real." He stood up behind his desk. "Enough talk. Bring your parcel and we will visit Dr. Brandon together."

As we followed him down a sloping passage that seemed to lead underground, with two archers bringing up the rear, I began to suspect we'd end up in a torture chamber. "Are you sure we should be doing this?" Ives whispered to me, and almost at once let out a scream as something darted from the darkness above our heads.

"It is only a bat," Hsun explained, as if that would calm her. "Bats are a sign of good luck in China."

"Not for me, they're not! Let's get out of here, Stanton."

But we had reached our destination at the bottom of the ramp. Hsun motioned to one of his men and a door was unlocked. A bearded man with shaggy hair and horn-rimmed glasses looked up as we entered. Though his cell had no windows, it seemed comfortable enough, with a good-sized bed, lounge chair, desk, and adjoining bathroom. The only item of possible torture was a large picture of Lord Hsun that adorned one wall. I recognized now that his drooping moustache was in the Fu Manchu style, no doubt a result of his reading the Sax Rohmer novels in his bookcase.

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"I have brought you visitors," he announced to his prisoner. "They are here to deliver a parcel to you."

"Dr. Brandon?" I asked, extending my hand in greeting. "We're couriers from the United States. I'm Walt Stanton and this is Juliet Ives."

"I'm pleased to receive visitors of any sort," he told us. "I seem to be a prisoner here."

I turned to Hsun. "Could we speak to him alone?"

"That will not be possible. I must personally inspect this parcel you are delivering."

"It's only medication."

"Then open it."

I ignored the order and handed the parcel to Dr. Brandon. "If you will just sign for this, we can be on our way."

"Certainly." He scrawled his name on the receipt and was reaching for the package when Ives suddenly stopped him.

"Wait! How can we be certain this is really Dr. Brandon?"

It seemed like a foolish question, but she had a point. How could we be certain? Was this all some sort of a trick concocted by Hsun to gain the contents of our package? "Do you have any proof of your identity?" I asked. "A passport, maybe?"

"Not with me. I have one back at my house, which also serves as our small clinic. If you came from there you must have met my assistant, Clare Marvell. She can vouch for my identity."

"Then we'll have to go back there," Ives decided.

But Lord Hsun would not hear of it. "You stay, the package stays. I will send someone for the woman."

"It would be easier if you simply released the doctor and we returned to his house," I suggested.

But the would-be warlord shook his head. "There is the matter of some stolen china-blue vases. And one of my men who died."

"You'd better explain that to us."

"Very well." Hsun took a seat in the armchair while Ives and Brandon and I sat on the edge of the bed. "The good doctor has been treating me for a variety of minor ailments. He comes here frequently, and of late I have been troubled by the disappearance of certain small china-blue vases from my private collection. They are very old and very valuable. I assigned one of my personal archers, Teo, to search Dr. Brandon's black bag when he left. They fought, and Teo was injured in the fracas. He died a few hours later."

Brandon shook his head sadly. "I had no intention of harming him. I tried to save him, but it was impossible without hospital facilities."

"You must be punished," Hsun insisted. "Teo was a mere boy, only seventeen years old."

"That's for the courts to decide," I said.

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"I am the court here," he replied, and I could see little point in arguing with him.

"Did he have a family?" Ives asked.

"No one but me," the warlord answered. "Teo has been with me since he was eleven. He was like a son."

Dr. Brandon snorted. "So much like one that he sold Teo's body to Yang Yuxing, the traveling funeral director."

"You did *what?*" Ives was aghast at the thought.

"No wonder you're holding the doctor a prisoner," I said. "You wouldn't want him spreading the word about your heartlessness."

"The boy deserves a companion after death, and Yang Yuxing will provide one." He motioned toward the parcel. "Now open the package, Dr. Brandon."

"We still need proof of his identity," I said.

Brandon suddenly remembered. "I have an American driver's license with my photograph. Will that do?"

"Let's see it."

Ives and I examined the California license and decided it seemed authentic. She handed over the package, but Brandon seemed in no hurry to open it. He placed it on the floor by his bed. "I'll look at it later," he told us.

But Hsun had other ideas. "I am most curious about this package. You will open it now."

I had to admit that Ives and I were curious too, but we weren't about to force the issue. I waited to see what would happen. "No," the doctor told him. "I will open it when I am alone."

Hsun called in the archer who stood guard in the hall. "If he does not open the package by the time I count three, put an arrow in his chest."

The archer pulled an arrow from his quiver and fitted it into the bowstring. "You won't kill me," Brandon said with confidence. "Where would you find another doctor to replace me? I'm keeping you alive. The Chinese government would probably send someone to poison you."

Hsun thought about that. Then he issued his order. "If he does not open it, do not shoot him. Shoot the woman instead."

"Wait a minute!" I shouted, jumping to my feet. "Any arrow aimed at her will have to pass through me first!"

Dr. Brandon sighed and held up a hand. "I have caused one death here already. I cannot be responsible for another. I will open the parcel." He tried to tear the packing tape, which seemed a bit thicker than I remembered, then requested a knife. Hsun obliged with a dagger he wore beneath his robe, and I held my breath as the wrappings fell away, already pretty certain the mysterious package did not contain medical supplies.

Hsun's eyes widened in disbelief as the final wrappings fell away, revealing stacks of neatly cut white paper, the bundles held

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together with rubber bands. He lifted one and flipped through the packet, but the sheets were all blank. It was nothing but white copy paper, cut into strips.

"What is this?" he demanded of the doctor. "Who hires couriers to fly halfway around the world with a package full of blank paper?" He frowned at it some more. "Does it have invisible writing?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Brandon replied, seeming as perplexed as the rest of us.

"You could try heat or lemon juice," I suggested. "That might make any writing visible."

Hsun handed a packet of the paper to his guard and spoke quickly in Mandarin. "We wait," he said.

The guard returned within ten minutes, bearing several scorched sheets of paper and others damp with lemon juice. Neither technique had produced results. The paper was still blank.

"What were you expecting in the package?" I asked Brandon.

A shrug. "Medical supplies."

"No wonder we weren't stopped by airport security or customs. Nothing showed up on the X-rays." Ives had gone into one of her deep-thinking modes that I knew so well. "Tell me one thing, Lord Hsun. When Dr. Brandon tussled with young Teo and accidentally wounded him fatally, were any of those china-blue vases found in his black bag?"

"No," the warlord admitted. "He had nothing but medical supplies. I cannot understand why he fought with Teo if he was innocent."

"I suppose Chesterton would call it a paradox," Ives told him.

"Who?" Hsun asked, puzzled.

"Chesterton. He was a contemporary of Sax Rohmer, though Father Brown and Fu Manchu never met."

"Ives," I said with some exasperation, "what in hell are you talking about?"

"Dr. Brandon resisted the search because he didn't want his innocence discovered."

Ives refused to explain more until Hsun freed Dr. Brandon and allowed him to return to his house. There she promised to produce the stolen vases and explain why anyone would pay us to fly halfway around the world to deliver a package of blank paper. I was surprised when Hsun agreed to this, but less surprised when he announced he would be accompanying us with a trio of his archers.

Ives and I took Dr. Brandon in our car, with a nervous Chen Yi driving. He adjusted his rearview mirror to keep an eye on the warlord's large black limousine that followed close behind. "This man is a killer," he warned us. "He shows no mercy."

"He's a pussycat," Ives countered. Dr. Brandon said nothing.

It wasn't until we were almost back at the doctor's house that I realized a third vehicle had joined our procession. It was Yang

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Yuxing's hearse, no doubt still looking for bodies.

Clare saw us coming and appeared in the doorway to greet us. She gave Brandon a heartfelt hug. "I didn't know if I'd ever see you again."

"These folks got me out, but Hsun treated me well. He's concerned about the disappearance of those vases and Miss Ives here told him she would recover them if he freed me."

Clare stared hard at Ives. "How do you expect to accomplish that?"

"It shouldn't be difficult. Let's wait until Lord Hsun comes in." Already we could see him exiting the black limousine, accompanied by his archers.

"They must wait outside," I told Hsun as he entered, and he didn't argue. The archers took up positions near the road, as if guarding us from Yang Yuxing's hearse that had just pulled up.

When Dr. Brandon, Clare, Hsun, and I were seated, Ives took up her Charlie Chan position in the center of the room. "Two things seem to have disappeared in this area recently," she began. "First we should consider several small china-blue vases taken from Lord Hsun's personal collection. He accused Dr. Brandon of taking them, and held him captive, but there were no vases in the doctor's black bag when it was searched. If he was not the thief, why did he offer resistance to the search and get himself held prisoner? We know that Clare Marvell often accompanied Brandon on his visits to Hsun. The only explanation for the doctor's resistance was to protect his assistant by throwing suspicion on himself. Where are the missing vases, Clare?"

"I don't—" she began, but Dr. Brandon interrupted her.

"There's danger here, Clare. Tell the truth."

She sighed and got to her feet. "All right. I only took three of them. They were such lovely little things and I didn't think he'd miss them." She walked to one of the cabinets and opened it, removing three small objects wrapped in plastic.

Hsun made a hissing sound as he expelled his breath. He rose to accept the vases from Clare, unwrapping each in turn to examine it. "Are those your property, in good condition?" Ives asked.

"Yes," he replied.

"That's one mystery solved, and quite easily. Now we turn to the package Stanton and I carried over here from America. Can we really believe we were paid to transport bundles of blank paper? Of course not! Somewhere along the line a substitution was made. It seemed to be the same package we brought here, although I noticed that the wrapping tape seemed wider." I nodded, aware of the same thing. "Was it possible a switch had been made somewhere along the way? I'd brought the parcel over in my carry-on bag and was ready to swear it had been in Stanton's or my possession the entire time. But had it really been?"

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"Of course!" I insisted. "It was never out of our sight."

"Except . . ." Ives began. "Except when we first arrived here this morning. I placed the package on the desk over there. I was trying to use my cell phone to call back to the States and went outside. Then Clare told Stanton there was no reception here and Stanton had to come to the door and tell me. Neither of us had our eyes on the package."

Clare Marvell snorted. "Do you think I stole that too, along with the vases?"

"That's exactly what I think."

"It was only out of your sight for a few seconds. How could I have made up a duplicate package and switched them in that instant?"

"I asked myself that, and there's only one possible answer. The duplicate parcel was prepared in advance, with the hope that you'd be able to switch them. And that means this wasn't the first parcel. It might have been the first that Stanton and Ives delivered, but there had been earlier, identical packages. There's no other way you could have fashioned so exact a duplicate."

"Wait a minute," I objected. "What if our package had been different?"

"Then she wouldn't have made the switch. I think she only did it because she feared the doctor wouldn't return alive and we'd take the parcel back to America with us."

"What did it contain?" Hsun asked.

"Certainly Dr. Brandon and Clare know what it contained. The clue to that was in the bundles of blank paper. Clare wouldn't have replaced medical supplies with paper because we would have noticed the difference in weight. She replaced paper with paper. The parcel contained paper money, almost certainly American currency in large denominations. Hundred-dollar bills would be my guess. Of course we didn't declare the package and nothing showed up in the X-rays. Chinese customs might have made us open it, but they just felt around in my carry-on and let us through."

Dr. Brandon cleared his throat. "The money was for medical supplies. Our clinic here is supported by an American charity."

"It's time to open it up," I told Clare. "Let's see this mysterious money that couldn't be transferred any other way."

I expected her to return to the same cabinet where she'd kept the china-blue vases, but instead she walked to the waste basket beneath the desk. She'd dropped it in there during the substitution and it was as good a hiding place as any. She handed it not to me but to Brandon, who quickly opened it. "You made a good guess, young lady," he told Ives. "Hundred-dollar bills, ten thousand dollars in each packet and a hundred thousand in all."

"Hardly the type of currency you could use at the corner store," I observed. "If you had a corner store. It was meant as a payment to someone. A bribe, perhaps. There are certain parts of the world

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where large quantities of hundred-dollar bills are used routinely for illegal transactions, but I see no poppy fields here. We understand there are strippers and gamblers, but nothing to attract this much money on a regular basis."

Clare Marvell moistened her lips. "The money comes from an American government agency to maintain a secret listening post monitoring communications here in China. This is the perfect location for it, remote but not that far from Beijing. The money arrives every sixty days, always by a different courier. Niles is merely the conduit."

Ives nodded. "And he delievers the money to Lord Hsun here."

That was when things suddenly went wrong. Clare shouted "No!" but Hsun had already drawn the dagger from beneath his robe and rushed forward to claim the money. Ives turned on her heel, shot out a solid right fist, and punched him in the nose.

"I told you he was a pussycat," she said as the warlord toppled to the floor.

That was where it should have ended, but we had just a moment of triumph before Clare told us, "I shouted *no* because you had the wrong person. Hsun is just a small-time extortionist, someone to scare a few farmers. If he was anything more, the Chinese government would have crushed him long ago. He was only worried about his vases."

Ives looked blank. "But there's no one else. If Dr. Brandon isn't funneling the money to Hsun, where is it going?"

At that moment the answer came through the front door, gun in hand. It was Yang Yuxing, the traveling undertaker. "I have come for the body. This time you must give me the body or the operation will shut down."

"He wants the money," Clare explained. "That's why he came here earlier. He knew the courier was due today."

From the floor, Hsun roused himself from Ives's blow. He saw Yang Yuxing with the gun and shouted a command in Mandarin. I heard the twang of bowstrings and the traveling undertaker toppled forward. There were three arrows in his back.

On the plane back to the States, I asked Ives, "What do you think? Was our mission a success or not?"

"I guess it depends on how you look at it. We delivered the parcel to its proper recipient, so that was certainly a success. But our client may not be happy to learn that a key link in their eavesdropping network is out of action."

"Perhaps they can recruit Lord Hsun to take his place."

"Please, Stanton!"

I stared out at the burning evening sky over the Pacific. "You know, Father Brown and Fu Manchu may never have met, but Juliet Ives and Fu Manchu met, and I was there." ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

THE LIVE WEAPON

by Richard Macker

Translated from the Norwegian by Runar Fergus

Richard Macker is a pseudonym of Reidar Thomassen, one of Norway's most successful crime writers. Mr. Thomassen's fiction has been adapted for Norwegian TV, and he has won numerous literary awards. Critics praise his psychological insight and ironic style. His work has appeared in *EQMM* several times before.

Half an hour before midnight Roger Skaare shot another searching glance at Nancy Kragvik. Yes, she definitely had all the signs now. Her restlessness and her loud, piercing voice indicated that she had been drinking heavily. So far, so good, he thought to himself, but there's still some way to go yet. A cold, tingling sensation traveled down his spine.

Roger Skaare himself was leaning against the bar in Wilfred Jæger's elegant bachelor pad. The party was crammed, and the buzz of conversation filled the air. His eyes, however, were firmly focused on Nancy Kragvik.

Things were certainly developing. Now she was clinging desperately to a young, blond, and obviously uncomfortable man whom Roger Skaare had never seen before. Her voice had attained that metallic, hysterical tone that indicated that her blood-alcohol level was reaching an alarming height.

Roger Skaare had only to wait until the wee hours. Nancy Kragvik was always one of the last guests to leave a party and this was mainly due to her unbridled conceit and manic addiction to men, which eventually drove the other guests away.

"I'll bet you're wondering why I invite Nancy to my parties," Wilfred Jæger had said to Roger Skaare earlier in the evening. "But I don't actually invite her. She simply turns up. And I don't have the heart to ask her to leave. After all, she was married to Steingrim once and somehow belongs to the company. In any case, in my

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opinion she has excellent intuition, and I somehow have the feeling that it may come in useful one day."

Roger Skaare rarely attended parties like this one. He was a believer in a regular domestic life and led a quiet existence with his wife Betty, his adolescent son Bernt, and Creepie, the family dachshund. This weekend Betty had gone to visit a close friend in a neighbouring town, and for once a party suited him perfectly.

Roger Skaare was employed as assistant director with the import business Egalin, where Wilfred Jæger was the general manager and Steingrim Kragvik, Nancy's former husband, was both the largest shareholder and the managing director. Roger Skaare had one passion apart from his dark-haired, petite wife, and that was an intense hatred of Steingrim Kragvik. For it was he, Roger Skaare, who had founded Egalin, confident that he had finally found the goose that would lay the golden egg after years of floundering around in all sorts of unthinkable business sectors. Then he had made the mistake of a lifetime. He hired the cheeky, ambitious, charming, and dangerously clever Steingrim Kragvik. In no time Kragvik had set the wheels in motion, acquired the majority of shares, and shoved Roger Skaare down to the insignificant, frustrating, and poorly paid position of assistant director.

Roger Skaare was a quiet but nonetheless proud man, a man of thought who never made a fuss but who was capable of achieving his goals through meticulous preparation. He characterised himself as a philosopher, and although he didn't consider himself a happy man, due to his career situation, he could still experience a warm flush of contentment when resting his eyes on the almost classical beauty of Betty's face, or as he lifted a heavy glass of Bohemian crystal and allowed a vintage Rhine wine to trickle down his throat, thinking of how deeply he hated Steingrim Kragvik, and how exhilarating it would be to see Egalin's managing director pale and dead, as the victim of a perfect murder.

It was the perfect murder that Roger Skaare was planning to commit. However, he was a sceptical and careful man who by no means ignored the opinion of the criminal experts that the perfect murder was an impossibility. But Roger Skaare figured that these experts were reckoning from the assumption that the person who committed the murder was the actual murderer. But isn't it often the case, he mused, that the hands that commit the deed are actually controlled by invisible, underlying forces? And that didn't necessarily mean hypnotic or unconscious reflexes, but rather commands entered into a human brain, much like commands fed into a computer. In other words: the perfect murder using a human weapon.

Roger Skaare emptied his drink and took another glance at Nancy Kragvik. *She* was his live weapon, and she fulfilled his strict

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requirements perfectly. First of all, she had been married to Steingrim Kragvik and been tossed aside and replaced by a string of far younger and infinitely more attractive versions of the fairer sex. In short: She had been dumped and thrown on the scrap heap at a time when both she and many others were convinced that she was on the threshold of what she had always dreamt of—a life of luxury and opulent, boundless entertainment. Her second important attribute was that she was the type who became dangerously hysterical and aggressive under the influence of alcohol, not an uncommon occurrence lately, and in addition, she had the ability to almost completely forget what she had done when the next morning arrived.

An hour after midnight Roger Skaare confirmed that Nancy Kragvik was approaching what he scientifically termed "the optimum condition." She was hanging around the neck of the last superfluous guest, a middle-aged bald man, and was singing into his ear in a braying, out-of-tune voice: "Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuss auf Liebe eingestellt." Roger Skaare found the situation comical. The bald man's name was Balder, an Egalin agent and a father of many children, who was from a small town in the "dark interior" where he reputedly was the foreman of the teetotalers society and the church committee. Wilfred Jæger often used inventive and unorthodox methods to rid the company of unprofitable business connections.

The unfortunate Balder finally managed to tear himself loose from Nancy Kragvik's iron grip. He donned a worn beret and bid a terse farewell before hurrying out the door. Roger Skaare smiled to himself. The time had come. Nancy and he were the last two guests, and he knew what was about to take place.

Nancy Kragvik didn't disappoint. She strode directly towards Wilfred Jæger and Roger Skaare, who had sat down before the fireplace with a nightcap. "Listen to me," she said aggressively, pointing towards Wilfred Jæger with a ringed, long-nailed finger. "Why does it always end like this? Why do men keep running away from me? What is it about me that scares them away?"

Wilfred Jæger sighed audibly. The furrows in his brow had deepened, and Roger Skaare was convinced that it was from having to come up with diplomatic answers to such questions from Nancy Kragvik.

"Nancy, dear," said Wilfred Jæger after a while, "sit down and relax. Balder is not your type. He has a wife, six kids, and a wallet that reflects his poor business sense."

Nancy Kragvik's voice took on an even more screeching and accusing tone. "Are you insinuating that I'm only after men with money? *I*, who've spent my entire life searching for simple, peaceful happiness?"

Roger Skaare barely contained the urge to roar with laughter. Wilfred Jæger sent him a pleading glance. He was begging for help. The time was getting near, thought Roger Skaare.

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"There are more than a billion adult men on this planet," announced Nancy Kragvik with renewed force and aggression. "My question is, why shouldn't there be one, just one, who could appreciate my worth?"

She was still directing her inquiries towards Wilfred Jæger, who was getting himself into trouble.

"Well," he said, scratching his head, "we are dealing with two different categories here. First of all, there are those who don't know you. Then there's the other category of those who do know you. It's . . ."

"It's . . . ?"

Nancy Kragvik pointed a pleading finger at Wilfred Jæger, who at this point chose to retreat. He climbed heavily out of the armchair, and when he passed Roger Skaare he bent over and whispered in his ear: "Help me, Roger. Get her out of here, for heavens sake."

A feeling of triumph swept through Roger Skaare. Finally he was alone with her. Now was the time to load the weapon.

Nancy Kragvik had already set her eyes upon him, and he felt a pang of anxiety when he thought of the force he was about to tame and control.

"What about you, Roger, can *you* give me an answer? You, who are so happily married to your Betty."

The sarcasm in the last sentence sent a chill through him. Nancy Kragvik had capsized on the sea of love and it was obvious that she wished nothing better for anyone else. She had always borne a grudge towards his and Betty's happiness and she had never come after him, probably because she knew that she couldn't compete with Betty.

"Dear Nancy," he said slowly, "do you *really* want me to be honest? Can you *really* take the truth?"

The effect was immediate. Nancy Kragvik sank into the chair beside him and it almost seemed as if she had stopped breathing.

"Y-yes," she said hoarsely, "I can take the truth, Roger."

"You should leave town, Nancy," he said quietly but firmly. "There's no future for you here. Don't you know what people say about you? Do you have any idea of the stories that people tell?"

Nancy Kragvik wiped her forehead with a shaking hand.

"I . . . I know that I've been a bit wild and that I've thrown caution to the wind occasionally. Is that what you're getting at?"

Roger Skaare slowly shook his head.

"No, it's not that. It's something far worse. They say you're a psychopath, a . . . a murderess who killed your own child and a few months later tried to kill the child's father."

Her face became a mask, her eyes wide and staring.

"*Who* says so?" she asked tonelessly.

Roger Skaare slowly shrugged.

"Don't ask me how these rumours arise, Nancy. *I* know that

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they're only malicious rumours. And I only thought that you should know the truth. And in advising you to leave town, I'm concerned only for your own good."

She stood up and gripped his arm.

"*Who* is responsible for these rumours?"

He knew he didn't have to say anything. She would answer the question herself. And she did:

"It's Steingrim. It has to be Steingrim. My God, how evil, how devilish! Everyone knows that our baby died alone in his cot. And Steingrim's poisoning . . . that was just a freak accident. He'd put the insecticide on the spice rack himself."

She hid her head in her hands for a few moments. Then she suddenly got up, moving like an insomniac.

"I have to go," she said tonelessly. "Goodbye, Roger. And thanks for telling me this. You have no idea what this means to me."

She disappeared from the room. Roger Skaare remained seated and poured himself another drink and toasted himself. Everything had gone according to plan.

Wilfred Jæger appeared after a while and slapped Roger Skaare heartily on the back. "Amazing! Nancy left quite voluntarily. I've never seen anything like it. How on earth did you manage it?"

Roger Skaare smiled suitably modestly.

"Oh, it was easier than you might think."

Wilfred Jæger slapped his shoulder and grinned broadly. "From now on you have an open invitation to all of my parties."

In the taxi on the way home, Roger Skaare whistled quietly to himself. He was in an excellent mood, and when he arrived home he gave Creepie two sausages as a snack before going to bed. He took a long, devoted look at Betty's picture on the dressing table before turning off the light. It was lonely without her, but next evening she would be back with him again, with her raven hair covering the pillow next to him.

He didn't get up until eight-thirty the next morning and spent plenty of time over his breakfast. He had a stern, fatherly talk with Bernt, his son, who had arrived home late from a school party, and he gave Creepie another sausage. He had the feeling that something was about to happen. It was as though he had made a good investment and was just waiting to reap the rewards.

He didn't have to wait for long. Just before half-past nine the phone rang, and a dark, brusque voice filled his ear:

"Hello, Mr. Skaare. This is detective Øyra speaking."

"Go ahead." Roger Skaare squeezed the phone hard.

"You know Director Steingrim Kragvik, don't you?"

"Of course, I'm employed by the same company."

"I'm afraid I have some bad news for you. Kragvik is dead."

"Dead!"

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"Yes. Murdered. Last night. It seems to be his former wife who has committed the crime. We are currently in Kragvik's apartment interrogating her. She says she can't remember anything from yesterday evening and last night, apart from the fact that she was at a party at Wilfred Jæger's place. She claims that you were among the guests at the party. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And Nancy Kragvik was there, too?"

"She was."

"Could you describe her condition?"

"Pretty inebriated, I'm afraid."

"I see. Listen, Skaare, we haven't been able to rouse Wilfred Jæger yet. Would you be so kind as to come round to Kragvik's apartment so that we could ask you a few more questions about this tragic matter?"

"Sure. Of course. I'll be over at once."

Roger Skaare hung up. His heart was still racing. This was one of the most momentous occasions in his life. His hands were shaking with the excitement, but he took the time to calm down with a drink. When he got into the car he felt a tingling sensation of triumph. He'd done it.

Steingrim Kragvik's apartment was at the top of a ten-story building close to the city center. Roger Skaare had been there a few times before, but that was many years ago, when Kragvik was new to the company and had yet to reveal his real ambitions and dictatorial inclinations. While Roger Skaare was in the elevator he didn't feel a shred of remorse, just a dull feeling of relief, a kind of confirmation that justice had been served.

The heavy oak door to the apartment was ajar, and Roger Skaare pushed it open and walked in. Detective Øyra was nowhere to be seen, but there were many rooms in the apartment. He opened the door to the living room.

He stepped back sharply in horror. In the room, on an enormous Persian carpet, lay Steingrim Kragvik in a twisted position. He was dressed in pyjamas. His full, dark hair was a mess, and his broad, bearded face had stiffened in a horrifying grimace. Roger Skaare stood there with his hand on the door handle, paralyzed by the sight. Although he had wanted Steingrim Kragvik dead, he had been sure that the police would have removed the body. A direct confrontation with death was too much for his tender, almost delicate constitution.

The eerie, almost claustrophobic quietness made him even more nervous.

"Detective Øyra!" he called. Then a little louder, and then even louder again. But no one appeared. Only the remote, almost inaudible echoes from his cries fell on his ears.

This isn't right, there's something wrong here, he thought as he

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stumbled towards the entrance. He grabbed the knob and turned it, but the door didn't open. It was locked. He turned the latch of the Yale lock, but still the door wouldn't open. It had an extra deadbolt lock, and it had obviously been locked from the outside. Someone had locked him in. He was alone with a corpse!

His shaking intensified, and sweat was beginning to appear on his forehead. This was without a doubt the worst thing he had ever experienced.

His dizziness was almost overpowering, but he managed to make his way back to the living room and strode towards the liquor cabinet, avoiding looking at the body at all costs. When he had slurped down a measure of cognac, he noticed that his hands were shaking less and that he was more or less thinking clearly. There's no use running from this, and I've no reason to run, he thought to himself, and noted that his mood lifted somewhat. No one would suspect him of this murder, after all; no one knew of his intense hatred of Steingrim Kragvik. He had, as a part of his plan, been careful only to speak well of Egalin's managing director when others were listening. He had even actually praised him at times.

Roger Skaare sat down by the phone, found the number for the police in the phone book, and dialed. A weary voice answered, and Roger Skaare noted satisfactorily that his own voice was firm, almost authoritative. "My name is Roger Skaare. There's been a murder. The victim is Managing Director Steingrim Kragvik of Langgaten 6, top floor. About an hour ago I received a call from a man who presented himself as Detective Øyra. He told me that Kragvik had been murdered and that I had to come over to help with inquiries. When I got here, the door was open and I went right in. I found Kragvik dead on the floor in the living room. When I tried to get out to find Øyra, the outer door had been locked from the outside."

"Really," the policeman said with deliberation. "Detective Øyra, you said? We've never had anyone by that name in our department. Well, Skaare, we'll be there as soon as possible. Stay calm, and don't touch anything, neither the body nor the door handles or any other objects."

"Of course. I'll stay calm."

Roger Skaare hung up, let out a sigh of relief, and poured another measure of cognac. Now everything was in the hands of the police. He had always been a good taxpayer, and it was the duty of the police to get him out of this situation.

Ten minutes later he heard the entrance door open. A stocky, balding man walked in, followed by a number of uniformed and plainclothes police officers.

"Detective Myren here" said the stocky one, and nodded towards Skaare. "By the way, you had us fooled, Skaare."

"Fooled?" said Skaare uncomprehendingly.

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"Why, yes. You said that the door was locked from the outside, so we brought along a locksmith to take care of it. But the door was open and the key is on the inside. Take a look for yourself.

Roger Skaare went into the hallway and stared at the door. The detective was right. A key he hadn't previously seen was in the lock.

"But . . . but . . ." he said, and noticed that panic was taking hold again. "But I swear that . . ."

Myren didn't appear to be listening. He was back in the living room examining the body with the coroner.

"Strangled," said Myren and turned his head. "Listen, Skaare, do you have any idea as to who might have done this?"

Better be careful, thought Skaare frantically. Careful now. Don't say anything rash.

"Well," he said, as if thinking about it. "Well, no. Or well, Detective Øyra did say that it was his former wife, Nancy. That's why he asked me to come."

Detective Myren looked searchingly at Roger Skaare. "Need I remind you that there is no such person as Detective Øyra, Skaare?"

"No, well yes, but . . ."

Roger Skaare fell silent. To his despair he noticed that the alcohol had blunted both his brain and his voice.

"Kragvik was strangled by a man," said the coroner. "I can tell by the bruising on his throat. No woman has hands that size."

Roger Skaare gazed bewilderedly at the coroner. If Nancy Kragvik hadn't done it, who the hell could have? The man who had passed himself off as Detective Øyra? But who was that? He was in a daze.

"You're not looking too good," said Detective Myren, and studied Roger Skaare with his large brown eyes. "Have a seat while we look around the apartment."

Roger Skaare sat down and tried to get a grip on the chaos that was swirling around in his head. What if they didn't believe him? What if they thought all the stuff about Detective Øyra and the key was just a figment of his imagination? That would put him in a spot. But then, they'd have to find a motive. That would be impossible.

Detective Myren returned after a short while. It occurred to Roger Skaare that he had a different look on his face, as if his eyes had hardened. "Come here, Skaare," he demanded. "I've got something to show you."

Roger Skaare got up and followed Myren unsteadily into the master bedroom.

"Do you know the woman lying in the bed over there?" asked Myren and pointed towards a large pile of bedcovers and pillows.

Roger Skaare took a step forward. Another wave of shock swept over him, so profound that he had to struggle to keep to his feet.

The detective's voice sounded distant, yet annoyingly close.

"Well? Surely you know her."

Roger Skaare couldn't utter a word. He just stared and stared at

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the woman's face, and at the charcoal black hair flowing over the pillow.

"Y-yes," he finally managed to stutter. "It—it's Betty. My wife. But . . . "

He leaned heavily against the wall. His mind had given up on him. All he felt was a hopeless, frightening emptiness.

"Yes," said Myren. "I already know that it's your wife. I had a look at the passport in her purse. My my, she's obviously a heavy sleeper. She probably has no idea of what has been going on here. I'm afraid we'll have to wake her now, however. And I'm afraid that she's in for some pretty shocking news."

The stay in custody didn't help Roger Skaare's mental state, rather the opposite. Thoughts kept spinning round and round his mind, but he could see no solution to his predicament. He put his trust in his defence lawyer, but he in turn seemed unhappy with the meagre and unprovable information he was provided with.

"Skaare," he said, frowning, "you're giving me very little to go on here. Try to think, or you may be convicted on the basis of circumstantial evidence."

But Roger Skaare had no more information to provide. He had chosen to say as little as possible, firm in the belief that anything he said would prove his initial intent. In one way or another, it was he who had indirectly been the cause of Steingrim Kragvik's death.

Loneliness dug away at him. Betty had turned her back on him, and not even his son Bernt visited him. One day, however, Wilfred Jæger turned up and they had a fifteen-minute conversation, monitored by a police officer. It occurred to Roger Skaare that Wilfred Jæger looked healthier and better than ever.

"Roger, my old friend," he said in an emotional tone. "I would have done the same thing if I were in your shoes. And I'm pretty sure the judge will be lenient. You're looking at four to five years at the most."

Roger Skaare didn't have the energy to maintain his innocence. No one was going to believe him anyway, particularly not Wilfred Jæger, who had known how much Betty had meant to him.

"I always felt that Steingrim was a brutal and ruthless type," Wilfred Jæger continued. "But it came as a shock to me that he turned out to be a common womanizer. The man was simply a beast. I hope that I'm capable of managing the company with more decency while you're locked up."

Two months later Roger Skaare was convicted to seven years imprisonment for premeditated murder. And somehow he actually managed to resign himself to his fate. In one way he was actually proud, because a lot of people expressed their sympathy. There were quite a few who felt that a womanizer didn't deserve a better fate than the one that befell Steingrim Kragvik.

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A year later, when he was stitching together a pair of dungarees in the prison work camp, he was informed that there was a phone call for him.

It was Wilfred Jæger.

"Roger, my old friend. I have some news that may surprise you. I'm getting married."

"Married?! You!" said Roger Skaare, sincerely surprised. "The bachelor incarnate. Who's the lucky woman?"

Wilfred Jæger laughed heartily.

"Yes, well, believe it or not, Nancy Kragvik and I are getting hitched. Two pieces of driftwood on the stormy sea of life have finally found a port. By the way, she's been given a position in the company. In advertising. Nancy has always had a good nose for great opportunities, you know. And I've made good use of her unique intuition previously. I think we'll make a hell of a match."

When Roger Skaare hung up he felt confused. Nancy? A good nose for great opportunities? Intuition? And there was something disturbingly familiar about Wilfred Jæger's voice. Something he couldn't quite pin down, but which manifested itself on the phone.

Roger Skaare picked up another couple of sheets of cloth and started to stitch them together. There were quite a few things he should give more thought. But the exhausting numbness of his mind just didn't allow it.

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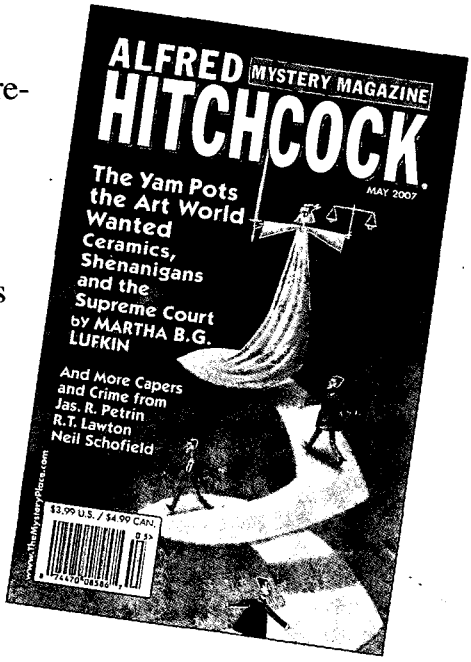

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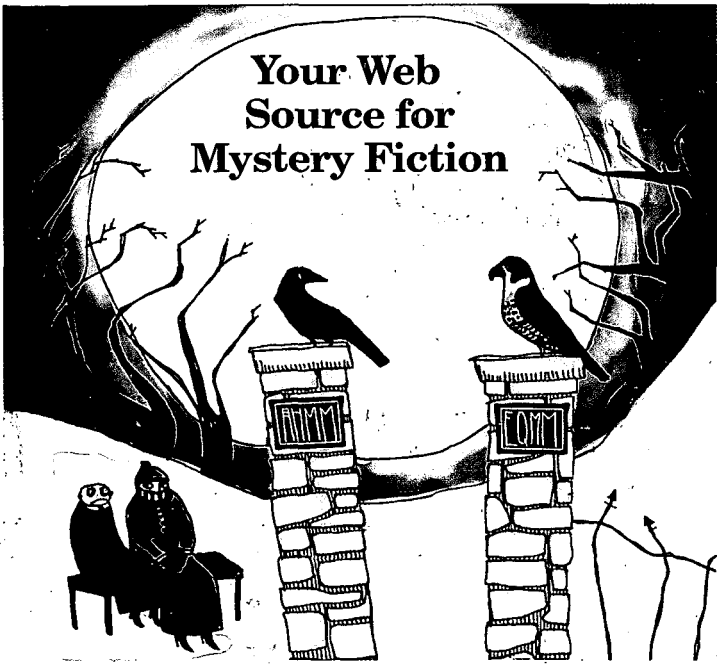

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